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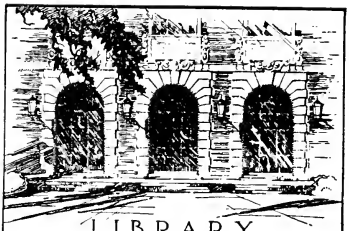

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PRECAUTIONS.

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A Novel.

BY

LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE,

AUTHOR OF

'FASCINATION,' 'SISTERS-IN-LAW,' 'THE TURN OF THE TIDE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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PRECAUTIONS.

CHAPTER I.

'WELL, Georgie! I suppose you expect me to congratulate you,' were the words with which Sir Eustace greeted his sister that afternoon, after he had heard the news of her engagement.

'I suppose so,' she answered shortly. 'It is a happy release.'

'That is what they say when one dies rather than when one marries,

my dear,' said Lady Bellingham fretfully.

'It answers the purpose very well,' said Eustace. 'When is it to be, Georgie?'

'There has not been time to think of that.'

'Ah, lovers' rhapsodies to get through! *juste!*'

'I think we are too sensible for that kind of thing,' said Georgina.

'You are, I have no doubt; about Mulroy I am not so sure. You see the business transaction is on your side, not his.'

'Eustace!' exclaimed Alice indignantly, for she saw her sister's lip quivering.

'I am anxious to divest the affair of any false romance it may have about it,' he went on speaking in the same way, half lightly, half bitterly. 'Don't let Georgie

delude herself into thinking that it is a sacrifice for the good of the family; the affair is simply personal.'

'I am aware of that, thank you,' said Georgina haughtily. 'Don't be afraid.'

'Then I suppose you understand your own wishes.'

'I imagine that I do.'

'Mulroy is too good a fellow to be trifled with; of course he is a little ass in some ways, but——'

'Eustace!' exclaimed Georgina; 'don't forget, please, that you are speaking of my future husband.'

'You are unkind,' cried Lady Bellingham.

'I don't want to be unkind,' he answered quickly. 'But, pshaw! what is the use of keeping up the farce? It is the way of the world to humbug and pretend. Among

ourselves, you cannot expect me to think or say otherwise than that this marriage is a misfortune for Mulroy, and a disgrace to us.'

'Eustace!' cried Georgie indignantly.

'I have said too much. I beg your pardon,' he went on, controlling himself by a strong effort. 'On these subjects, perhaps, men think more strongly than women.'

'Say something kind, Eu,' said Alice, putting her hand on his arm and looking up at him with tears in her eyes. 'Remember what a serious thing it is to her.'

'I am not likely to forget that.'

He went up to his sister with outstretched hand.

'Kiss me, Georgie,' he said; 'I did not mean to be unkind. You can make up

to Mulroy for the wrong you are doing him in one way: be a good wife, and take care of his dignity.'

Georgina did not answer; she was swallowing tears of disappointment and indignation with all her power.

Eustace threw himself into a chair, and took up the paper. This engagement was intolerable to him. With all the force of his nature he rebelled against the worldliness which made his sister determine to marry a man for whom she had no love. He was quite unable to view her proceedings with calmness or justice; he never realized that to one who knew nothing of real love—of its power, its grace, its sacredness—such a sacrifice was very different from what he deemed it. Events which had happened lately had lowered his standard of womanhood. His

own suffering had warped his reasoning powers: he saw only worldliness in Marion's unselfishness, and worse than worldliness in his sister's conduct. His pride suffered; it injured his sense of right, and embittered his own misfortunes to a degree that made him almost wild.

'I hope at least that you mean to be courteous to your future brother-in-law, Eustace,' said Lady Bellingham plaintively. 'Remember that you are now the head of the house, and, if you please, act accordingly.'

'He shall not complain of me,' said Eustace shortly.

A servant came in with a message, the salutations of their landlady, Marchesa di St. Isidoro, and a request to know whether Lady Bellingham would receive her.

She consented eagerly ; it was a relief to break through a conversation that was so painful. 'You will stay and see her?' she said to her son, as he rose to make his escape.

'Too late,' he said, with a suppressed groan, for the lady had followed quickly upon her messenger, and was already at the door.

She came in, the Marie de Seizons of old days. Eustace had never seen her, though she had become a frequent visitor to his mother and sisters, and he looked up with a sudden flash of curiosity. He had often heard his uncle speak of her, with the kind of half-tender, half-playful reminiscence of a dead love, in which, now that long years had chilled recollection and feeling, he himself hardly believed.

Madame di St. Isidoro was a slender

woman, with a thin, delicate face ; she was very colourless, and there was a dark shade under each of the long almond-shaped eyes which stamped her French origin. She always wore the deepest mourning, black laces and tulles round her throat and wrists, and a black veil-like cap on her soft gray hair. There was a smile on the sweet face as she came forward, offering her left hand, Italian fashion, in greeting.

'It is very good of you to receive me again so soon,' she said, speaking very good English, but with a strong foreign accent. 'I would not have ventured to come to-day, but I will tell you the truth : my business is a *quête*. Business, you see ; and you must forgive me and try not to show me that I am not welcome. This, then, is your son ?'

She looked at Eustace earnestly, holding his hand. 'I am glad to see you,' she said. 'Who are you like? You do not resemble your sisters.'

'Alice is said to be like me,' said Eustace, feeling an immediate attraction to the gentle woman who stood before him. She looked at him so earnestly that he grew restless under her eyes, and she turned away her face with a sigh. She prided herself on being a physiognomist, and what she read in his face troubled her.

'But now for my *quête!*' she exclaimed gaily; 'I will tell you all about it.'

Eustace brought forward a chair, and she seated herself. 'You none of you know my son yet,' she said; 'but you have heard of him, our Priore—is it not so?'

'We have often heard of him, but I have never had the pleasure of seeing him,' said Lady Bellingham.

'He has just returned from Florence. He is musical, very musical; he writes beautifully; he loves all music. He speaks with great enthusiasm of a certain Ursel. You have heard him play?'

'Yes,' exclaimed Alice enthusiastically. 'He plays magnificently; he will be one of the greatest violinists in the world.'

'So says Don Paolo, my Priore—he is wild about this man. But he says also that he is very poor; that he has married the most foolish little wife; that he has enormous talent, but a shocking violin, so that his genius is wasted, absolutely thrown away.'

'And you propose a *quête* for him?' said Lady Bellingham, trying to look in-

terested ; it all seemed so trivial and dull to her, in the middle of her tumultuous thoughts and plans.

'Yes ; to procure him a really good violin. There is one to be had now at Vanni's—do you know the shop ? It is a wonderful instrument, a Straduarius ; it has a marvellous perfection of tone. My Priore has set his heart on purchasing it for Ursel, and has started a *quête*.'

'What is the price ?' asked Eustace, with interest.

'Ah ! the price is high. Vanni asks five thousand francs ; but Paolo is sure that he will let it go for four thousand. You see, it is difficult to sell objects of so high a price at Santa Chiara ; he will be glad of the opportunity.'

'And have you already succeeded in collecting any money ?' said Alice.

'Yes; I have asked many friends. It is a good work, one of real charity, for I believe it would be the making of Ursel. But we are not rich at Santa Chiara. Paolo says ask, ask, and ask for all his charities; and now when people see me come, they prepare their five-franc pieces; but all put together, it is a long way to go before we reach four thousand francs. I have collected about eighty.'

So Eustace put his hand into his pocket. This straightforward foreign system of begging for good works embarrassed him. He wondered what he ought to give; it made him shy, but Lady Bellingham interposed:

'I will give you ten francs, Marie,' she said. 'Will that do?'

'Thank you a thousand times; if every one gave me ten francs, we should soon

reach our sum,' said Madame di St. Isidoro sweetly. 'And you, my friend,' will you also give me ten francs for the good work?'

There was something so gentle and winning in her face, that Eustace wished the two napoleons he offered her were fifty. She took them very quietly, not expressing more gratitude for them than for Alice's five francs, and Georgie's regrets that she could not manage more than three.

'I hope you will succeed,' he said warmly, as she rose to go.

'I hope so, too,' she answered. 'I am not sure; it is a large sum. But Paolo is one of those people who always succeed in the long-run; he will not be denied. You ought to know him; I should like to make you acquainted. Will you come and see me and him?'

'If you permit me.'

'Well then, *sans adieu.* I receive every Thursday evening after seven. It will be a pleasure to see you.'

'What a charming woman!' exclaimed Sir Eustace, when she had left them. 'She is most fascinating.'

'You always do like foreigners and foreign ways,' said Georgina. 'I cannot say I agree with you. Why does she come teasing us with her *quêtes?* I am sure Ursel would get on without her.'

'Do you think she will ever get together four thousand francs?' said Lady Bellingham. 'I do not think she will.'

'She says Don Paolo never fails,' said Alice. 'And people say wonderful things about him. He is looked upon as a kind of saint here.'

'Come out, Alice,' said her brother.

'Let us have a walk; this room is stifling.'

'I will come at once,' she answered brightly, running away to dress.

Lady Bellingham gave a sigh of relief; it would be pleasant to be free of both of them for a short time. Alice had a look in her large eyes which conveyed as much disapproval as her brother's outspoken words. She and Georgie would enjoy themselves, untroubled by lofty ideals; they would throw all scruples to the wind, and have a comfortable talk over the trousseau.

CHAPTER II.

ALICE could hardly keep up with her brother's long strides, as, unconscious of his pace, he crossed the town.

'Pah! these dark, narrow streets smell! I hope to goodness my mother won't make up her mind to stay in any of these odious foreign towns.'

Alice did not answer, save by a quickly suppressed sigh.

'Why can't you live quietly in England?'

'There is a limit to even quiet living in England, Eustace, and that limit has been reached.'

'Pshaw! People have lived and done well on half my mother's income.'

'But, dear old boy,' said Alice gently, 'surely it is better to live where one is happiest.'

'After all, it is for your own sake I speak,' he answered. 'I only want to guard against settling anywhere abroad. I suppose one has a superstition that one's own country is the most respectable.'

'Poor mamma! she has many cares.'

Eustace's sigh almost amounted to a groan. The hour of sunset was approaching, and the country round was bathed in a flood of luminous gold. Almost unconsciously Eustace had followed the road

he had taken before, and they now found themselves close to the violinist's villa.

'That is where Michel Ursel lives,' said he suddenly, and Alice looked up with quick interest.

In the painted loggia above her a young, gay-looking woman was sitting. She looked down on them and smiled and nodded, showing a row of brilliant white teeth. As she did so a door behind her opened, and Ursel himself came forward and looked out. His eyes rested on the brother and sister, and he was just about to draw back, when a little thrill of recognition passed over his face, and he slowly took off his hat and bowed.

It was a remarkable face; the brow very large and massive, much too large for beauty, and brought into greater prominence by the extreme thinness of the face

—it seemed as if the skin were stretched so tightly as to display the shape of the bones; the heavy brows overhung deeply-set eyes, with large eyelids, which half closed over them, except in moments of animation. He had a thick bush of fair hair, brushed straight backwards in German fashion; his thin-lipped, mobile mouth was shaded by an immense fair moustache.

The face of the maestro, as he looked down on them, was serene and very calm. The bright little woman beside him was dressed, not like a peasant, but one of the *mezzo ceto*. She evidently saw something that attracted her in Alice's face for she quickly gathered a couple of carnations from a pot standing at her right hand.

'Signora, see!' she exclaimed, and

threw them down. Alice caught them, and nodded her smiling thanks as she fastened them into her gown. There was a fluttering sound; a roll of music on the parapet had been displaced by the movement, and, rolling over, fell at their feet.

Eustace picked it up. Ursel uttered a hasty exclamation, and ran downstairs.

'A thousand pardons, sir,' he said, speaking in English with a strong accent. 'My giddy wife is always doing mischief.'

Apparently the little wife also wanted to see what was going on, for she came tripping down behind her husband, and stood, half hiding, peeping at the English young lady, who evidently attracted her strongly.

Eustace gave back the papers he had gathered together, and, as he did so, said:

'May we at least tell you how greatly we have enjoyed your playing, Signor Ursel?'

'Ah! I am honoured,' with a stiff little bow.

'Ask them to come in, Michel—ah, do!' whispered the young wife. Then plucking up courage, as her husband made no sign, she began: 'The garden is very pretty; our padrona makes good coffee. Will you come in, signora?'

Alice glanced at Eustace to ascertain his wishes before she answered. She was very tender to this big brother of hers, knowing the bitter trial through which he was passing. Her whole thoughts were bent on trying to smooth the roughnesses of life before him. She saw a look of interest in his face, and accepted.

Signora Ursel went first, showing the

way. They passed through yellow-washed passages and two anterooms with walls cleverly frescoed in imitation of festooned draperies and blue landscapes; after which they came out upon a most characteristic little garden. It was sheltered from the road by a very high wall with rude patterns pargeted over its rough-plastered surface. On the farther side there was nothing to obstruct the wide-spreading view of plain and hills, olive and vine yards. The foreground presented an idealized tea-garden on a very small scale. There were bowers over which, in summer, creepers hung, and little golden yellow pumpkins in rich luxuriance; small iron tables with spindle legs, and attenuated chairs; a tiny basin of water in which danced a little gurgling jet of water; a few old busts on pedestals;

a certain mossgrown untidiness which had a charm of its own.

Signora Ursel beckoned to Alice to approach, pointed to a chair, and seating herself, said to her husband, without turning her head :

'Shall we not have coffee ?'

'Is it not too cold ? Will you not come indoors ?'

'It is such a pretty place,' said Sir Eustace ; 'and wonderfully warm this evening, in spite of the winter season. Where are we ? What is this house ?'

'It is a very small and humble restaurant,' answered Ursel, glancing uneasily at his guests. 'My wife is indiscreet. What is there to attract you here ? Forgive her ; she knows no foreigners.'

'The place is exceedingly attractive,'

answered Eustace quickly. 'We are delighted to be here. Can we order coffee? Will you allow us to order some and to drink it with you?'

'But,' said Ursel, still looking perturbed, 'we shall not be alone long. To this café come my friends. They are sometimes many. They are musicians like myself, not of the world to which you belong.'

'If we are in the way,' began Eustace, rising; but Ursel leapt up. He was embarrassed between his great wish to be hospitable and his fear lest these English guests should be too much out of their element.

'In the way? But you do me honour!' he exclaimed; and Eustace willingly reseated himself.

It was a pleasant variety in his life. His curiosity had been aroused about

Ursel. He was interested in the man's strange face, he was fascinated by his extraordinary genius; while anything to occupy his mind, and turn the current of his jaded thoughts, was grateful to him.

A buxom Italian peasant woman brought out coffee and large circular cakes of *ciambella*. Ursel drew a pipe from his pocket.

'Is it permitted?' he asked courteously.

Eustace lighted a cigar himself.

Alice nodded her permission.

Signora Ursel spoke to her very confidingly.

'Michel cannot live without smoke,' she said. 'He smokes morning, noon, and night. He does all his work smoking, and only puts down his pipe when it is necessary to play or to eat.'

'You are Italian, signora,' said Alice; 'but surely your husband is not?'

'Italian? No. Michel is nothing—nothing at all,' she answered, throwing out her hands. 'His father was a German, Austrian — the less we say about that in this country the better, you understand—his mother was French, a Normande by birth. He was born in Milan; he was educated at Leipsic; and now, see, he is married in Tuscany.'

'So I suppose all these nations in turn desire to claim his genius?'

Signora Ursel looked as if she did not understand.

'You have heard him play?' she asked. 'He has talent, has he not?'

'Talent? He has the finest genius!'

'*Che, che!* you are too good,' with a little deprecating shrug.

It dawned upon Alice that the young wife had not the remotest idea of the marvellous powers of her husband, and she felt a little out of patience with her.

'You have such beautiful stuffs in England,' said Assunta Ursel, laying her little brown hand on Alice's gown. 'I have seen English stuffs. One cannot procure them here; but who knows? perhaps I also may travel some day.'

'Monsieur Ursel will certainly find his way there before long,' said Alice.

Sir Eustace caught the words, and turned to his host.

'You will visit us in our country some day?'

'It is possible,' he answered, in the very quiet measured voice in which he generally spoke. 'I cannot tell. My immediate future is not in my own hands.'

'There is much fame to be won in England.'

'Is that so desirable?' said Ursel. 'I don't know. I am a quiet man, and the world is noisy.'

'Ah! it is the penalty of fame that is so distasteful to you. I saw it in your face the other night.'

He puffed out a cloud of smoke.

'Foolish boys!' he said, smiling. 'It is an amusement to them, but bah! it is a very great bore to me. Heaven has made me what I am. I mean very quiet —see, more than unusually quiet.'

'Then it is strange to see you thus the centre of public acclamation.'

'That is my misfortune.'

Eustace could not help suspecting a little affectation; but looking up at the serene face beside him, which yet in its

mobile features had so strange a possibility of sensitiveness, he changed his opinion.

'Fame,' he said slowly, 'surely fame is sweet! the consciousness that such a gift as yours is unique, is appreciated, applauded, envied by all.'

'In a short time,' said Ursel, 'you shall judge for yourself what are the sweets of fame. Believe me, I am more rewarded by involuntary tears or laughter than by frantic plaudits—that you can doubtless understand. Sympathy is more precious than applause, and one wants sympathy; for to produce good music one must play on the heart-strings, and that causes pain. Do you understand? Sometimes very great pain.'

'But there are other results of fame; the pride of success, the distinction of ex-

celling others, the achievement of fortune. Are these nothing to you?'

'I cannot judge yet,' answered Ursel. 'My success is quite new, it is but a few months since I first appeared in public; applause is new to me—perhaps that is why I shrink from it. As to fortune, I am leased to an *impresario* for five years. His bargain is better than mine. It will be time enough to think of fortune afterwards. Do you see?'

'Leased? but surely that is very unfortunate.'

'So say my new friends, but one must make a beginning. Forgive me, I weary you with my own concerns.'

'Your indifference to that which most men hold the dearest, interests and astonishes me.'

'Perhaps I do not yet know myself,'

said Ursel gently. 'What you call fame has come on me thus: I have been accustomed always to much appreciation from little audiences; great ones do not seem to me so different. But if it is true that a man does not know himself till he has succeeded, it must be far more true that a man does not know himself until he has failed.'

As he was speaking, the landlady appeared again, ushering in two tall black-moustachioed men, who greeted Ursel with affection, and eyed his guests with some astonishment.

Alice Bellingham thought that it was time to go, but the evening was charming; there was an unwonted look of animation and interest in her brother's face which made her unwilling to move.

Another guest came in presently, a

hectic-looking German; then one more, a priest, whom Assunta greeted as 'Signor Priore,' and treated with evident reverence and ceremony.

They drank coffee and smoked with a little constraint; presently Ursel leant forward and spoke to Alice.

'Listen, signora,' he said. 'We have sometimes at this hour a little music—for ourselves only, you understand. If it will not inconvenience you, it is really a practice; if we make mistakes, we repeat. It will not annoy you? Our Signor Priore is more than indulgent;' and he smiled towards the priest.

Assunta rose and opened a door into the house; there was a large scantily furnished room, in the centre of which stood a grand-piano, covered with music.

'Come, Giacinto, to the piano,' she

exclaimed, addressing one of the men. 'And remember, Michel must have plenty of time for the "cadenza." You are too impatient,' and she tapped his shoulder.

'We will still sit outside,' she said to Alice. 'No? why not?'

'Because I like to watch the musicians.'

'Watch them? What an idea! And Michel is so ugly. I would rather hear the beauty and not see the ugliness; but as you will.'

Giacinto preluded brilliantly on the piano. Ursel tuned his violin, then gave a little nod, and they began.

'Bah, what an ugly piece!' exclaimed the German as they ended, and Giacinto took up the theme. 'Ugly! it is a horror, an extravagance; no air, no soul—nothing but chromatics. Choose something to revive us, *per pieta*.'

'It is excellent for the third finger,' said Ursel quietly. 'But to keep you quiet, see!'

They began to play again from Beethoven. Eustace sat with his head leaning against the wall, listening with enchantment. The music was beautiful, the execution perfect. The sun had quite gone down, gray twilight filled the room; a cold air began to stir the white curtains. Ursel shivered, and signed to Assunta, who closed the window.

'Bravo, bravo, Ursel!' they said when he stopped.

He sat down and passed his hand through his hair, making it stand up even more than before. There was a strained look on his face. With his bow he continued to touch one string again and again. The tune to him was not perfect.

'There are some things that are horrible in this life,' he said with a little shiver. 'The man who wrote that divine music became stone-deaf. That is discord; discord is intolerable.'

'Poor fellow, yes!' said Giacinto. 'Beethoven was afflicted by Heaven.'

He continued to touch a few chords softly.

'That string is faulty,' said the Priore, smiling. 'Tune it, Michel Ursel; tune it.'

'Am I not tuning it?' he answered, still making the note vibrate and twang.

'So God tunes His instruments.'

'But why should discord exist?' said Ursel. 'What should cause it?'

'Too deep a question, my friend,' said Giacinto, playing a little cadence very softly, always going back to the key-note for Ursel's benefit.

'It is horrible, it is terrible,' went on Ursel. 'That man's powers were capable of the highest degree of enjoyment, and those powers were useless to him.'

'Come, come, Ursel! enough of Beethoven; he is in peace.'

'And harmony,' said the Priore softly.

Ursel started slightly, then rose to his feet.

'Art thou worked up enough?—inspired, eh? Come, improvise.'

'Give me a theme,' he said, still touching the refractory string.

'Our country in peril, war, defeat, anxiety, triumph,' said Giacinto.

'Music,' said the German. 'Its struggles with prejudice, its mortifications, its successes.'

'No, no!' cried Assunta. 'Love, love, *caro mio!* Love divided, love lost, eh?'

Ursel ran up the scale; the tune was perfect now.

'Let each interpret according to his own ideas,' he said dreamily. 'What is music but the interpretation, not of thought, but of feeling too subtle for mere thought?'

He began to play.

Now came out the marvellous genius of the man, the wild, merry fun and fancy, when the violin seemed to laugh aloud at its own wild pranks; then strange discords and sounds bringing up vague doubts and discomforts, irritations, and troubles of crooked fate and perverse circumstance; now heavenly melody filling the mind with the perfection of sound and beauty, glorious images, a rounding of perfect harmonies of touch and finish. Alas! lasting too short a time, for through its exquisite perfection burst suddenly a

wail of minor chords, a new departure, pain coming into Eden, sorrow and sin and death flooding over the world.

It was growing quite dark. Spell-bound under that wonderful music, they all sat, afraid to move. Down the rough cheek of Giacinto stole a tear. Alice had clasped her brother's hand; the wailing of the music called forth an irresistible yearning for human sympathy in its sounds. All that had ever passed in their lives of anguish seemed to live again, to pant and struggle and cry. Alice held his hand tightly to control her overpowering emotion.

It was over, and the master laid down his violin.

'Bah, Michel!' cried his little wife. 'Why do you do it? No indigestion ever gave one a worse nightmare.'

The others could not speak.

'See, signori,' said Ursel, with rather a painful smile, 'I have, at all events, succeeded in making each one put his own interpretation on my music. That some should be less poetical than others is perhaps desirable for the happiness of humanity. Is it not so?'

Eustace and Alice rose to go.

'We have indeed been fortunate,' said the former.

He wanted to say something better, something that would convey to Ursel a little of the almost passionate admiration he felt for his genius; but the words would not come.

Perhaps Ursel perceived it in his looks, for as he shook hands he said gently:

'There are things better than applause,

as I told you, signore. Shall we meet again?'

'I hope so, indeed. May we return?'

'I shall be much honoured. Any Thursday you will find us; we have always this little meeting. *Au revoir.*'

He stood bareheaded to see them go. Ursel turned back into the house; his guests lingered a moment to satisfy their curiosity respecting the appearance in their midst of the English strangers; then they also departed, the sound of Giacinto's deep bass voice trolling out some popular song dying away in the distance.

CHAPTER III.

THE days passed away swiftly at Santa Chiara, and not unpleasantly. Sir Eustace, when the fact of his sister's engagement became quite established, laid himself out to be pleasant to his future brother-in-law. He found it uphill work at first, they had so little in common ; but there was something so simple, so earnest, and genuinely good about the character of Joseph Mulroy that he could not fail to perceive it at last, and the feeling which began with

enforced toleration ripened into something little short of affection.

Meanwhile the *quête* for Ursel's new violin proceeded slowly, and was still very far from producing the necessary sum.

One morning Madame di St. Isidoro rushed into Lady Bellingham's rooms looking so disturbed that all who were there started up in amazement.

'Alas! alas!' she exclaimed. 'Poor Ursel—it is too late!'

'What is it? What has happened?' they exclaimed.

'Happened! such a disappointment. I do not know how I am to tell the Priore. That man Vanni has got tired of waiting, and he has found a customer and sold Ursel's Straduarius.'

'I am indeed sorry!' exclaimed Sir

Eustace. 'It was such a chance to have lost. It is a bore!'

At that moment he chanced to catch sight of Mr. Mulroy's face; the rest of the party had gathered round Marie di St. Isidoro.

Joseph Mulroy retreated towards the window to hide the brilliant blush which tinged his very ears with scarlet. Eustace detected it, and would have asked some question, but he was deterred by an imploring gesture.

'It is a thousand pities,' he repeated.

'After all,' said Georgie comfortably, 'the prospect of making up the necessary sum was so remote, that perhaps it is just as well to have your *châteaux en Espagne* destroyed at once.'

'I dare say,' said Marie rather dolefully; 'but with all one's philosophy it is

a great disappointment, and will be so still more to my son. Well, well, *pazienza!*' and she smiled through something not very unlike a mist of tears.

Alice went up to her, and put her arm round her caressingly.

'Never mind,' she said; 'patience would not be worth the name if it could not live upon hope. In time, perhaps, we shall be able to manage it. Now, dear Marie, I want very much to make you acquainted with the Brown-Cliffords. They have been here now quite a month, so long that it seems quite strange that you should not know them. I think that you and Kitty will like each other very much.'

'Shall we? Yes; I think I shall, from all you have told me. Yes, dear, we will dismiss less agreeable thoughts from our

minds, and forget them. How shall I make acquaintance with these friends of yours?'

'We are expecting them this very moment. *À propos*, there is the bell.'

'And I am not fit to be seen!' exclaimed Madame di St. Isidoro. 'It is only to quite intimate friends one appears thus, without a bonnet or any of the apparatus of beauty.'

'You want nothing,' said Alice affectionately. 'We English are most stupid at paying compliments, as you know; but still, I must say you cannot look otherwise than lovely.'

'Little flatterer!' said her friend. 'Hush, hush! Don't you know that flatterers are the worst enemies of their dearest friends? they injure their souls,

and take away all the merit of their little good actions. I am sure you would not wish to do that to me.'

'I will run the risk,' said Alice, smiling.

Eustace followed Mr. Mulroy into the next room.

'You should manage your blushes better,' he said, laying his hand on his shoulder. 'So you are the culprit who has bought the coveted Straduarius. I fancied you already possessed one.'

'Oh yes, but I could not part with that!' exclaimed Joseph Mulroy. 'My poor mother gave it to me.'

'Then it was not for yourself you bought it?'

'For myself? Could you really think so? Come, come, Bellingham! be a good fellow, and don't betray me. I—I should

never hear the last of it. If that poor fellow had waited till the subscription was made up, he might have waited for ever, you see.'

'I see,' said Eustace. 'But why the secrecy? Surely it is futile. Ursel himself will betray you.'

'No. Ursel will receive it anonymously. I have provided against betrayal. You will be silent, won't you?'

'If you really wish it.'

'You don't know, you cannot realize how much I wish it.'

He looked so genuinely anxious and disturbed that Eustace was amused.

'I won't betray you, Joe,' he said. 'It is very jolly of you. Poor Ursel! I am delighted that he is to have it after all.'

'Ursel is a proud fellow; it will come

best this way for him also. Hark! visitors have arrived!'

'Yes. I heard the Brown-Clifford purr. I must be off. What are you going to do?'

'I don't know; anything you like.'

'There never is anything to do here,' said Eustace, with a long yawn. 'I think I shall soon cut it, and go back to England.'

'Ought you not to go in and see your mother's visitors?' said Joseph Mulroy, who, without being told in so many words, understood the wishes of the family.

'Not for the world,' was the answer, with more alacrity 'Mrs. Brown-Clifford and her perpetual precautions are too much for my delicate constitution.'

'I like the young lady very much indeed,' Joseph went on hesitatingly.

'Who? Kitty? Yes; a good little soul! I dare say she will be just like her mother some day.'

'She is very pretty and very nice.'

'Come with me, and leave the ladies to themselves; they will never miss us. We can get out through the kitchen if you don't mind. I wonder what possessed Italians when they built their houses with no passages, and endless rooms all opening into each other.'

He led the way through the kitchens and down a back staircase without detection.

The introduction between Madame di St. Isidoro and the Brown-Cliffords was accomplished. Marie was fond of English people, and always pleased to know them. Mrs. Brown-Clifford was always happy if she had a comfortable armchair.

'I hope you like our quiet little town,' said Marie, in her pretty broken English. 'There is not much attraction for foreigners, I am afraid—that is to say, what there is to see is very soon seen—yet your friends are good enough to say that they are very happy here.'

'I do not care for sight-seeing,' said the good lady, 'though I dare say it is very nice for those who like it. I can't say I care for picture-galleries. The churches my daughter insists upon showing me are deadly cold and pitch dark. I like a cheerful church myself.'

'Have you seen St. Onofrio ?'

'Yes, and caught a bad cold there. It ought to be thoroughly warmed with hot-water pipes, and that cold marble floor boarded to make it safe.'

'I am afraid we Italians are in all

respects behind you in the way of comforts.'

'Every nation has its own idea of comfort, after all,' said Kitty, speaking very gently. 'Our tightly-shuttered, carpeted rooms would never do in this beautiful climate.'

Madame di St. Isidoro looked at Kitty with some interest. She had not improved of late, or else it was that the colour of her gown (carefully chosen dust-colour for the convenience of travelling) was not becoming to her. She looked very white and shadowy, the sweet little face far too colourless. Her mother's eye falling upon her, she gave an odd little gesture of discontent. Kitty knew that movement only too well, and the thought it conveyed to her mind. Mrs. Brown-Clifford herself had had apple-cheeks and china-blue eyes;

it was indeed most hard upon her that she should have so shadowy a little daughter.

'Kitty,' exclaimed Alice Bellingham, 'I want you so much to hear Ursel. Have you any engagement for to-night? We are going to the theatre, to a concert there.'

'May I go, mamma?' said Kitty eagerly.

'Are you going yourself, Lady Bellingham?' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford; 'and are any strangers going with you?'

'One or two friends are going with us,' answered Lady Bellingham, trying affably to suppress a sound of haughtiness in her tones. 'You shall see their names, Mrs. Clifford, unless you can trust me not to introduce anyone to your daughter but people known to my own girls.'

'Mamma,' said Kitty, blushing crimson, 'do let me go. I should so like to hear Ursel.'

'Very well. Of course, Lady Bellingham understands me when I say that when one is abroad one must take precautions.'

Madame di St. Isidoro turned away to conceal a smile. Alice and Georgie had prepared her for this, so she was not surprised; only very sorry for poor Kitty, whose colour was coming and going in a painful way.

'Kitty does not look well,' said Lady Bellingham, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. 'What is the matter, my dear child?'

'I don't think she is well,' answered her mother, speaking for her. 'The foreign messes at dinner don't agree with

me, and I dare say they don't suit her either.'

'She has grown quite thin,' went on Lady Bellingham. 'What is it, Kitty?'

'I am quite well,' answered Kitty earnestly. 'It is nothing. I am not used to towns, and the noise keeps me awake at night, that is all. I shall soon be quite used to it.'

Lady Bellingham looked commiserating. Alice drew away Kitty from the general attention that so embarrassed her, and began to talk to her about other things. She was arrested in the midst of their conversation by hearing Madame di St. Isidoro say to her mother:

'By-the-bye, you are acquainted with the Austens, are you not? I think I have heard you speak of them.'

'Which Austens? Yes, I know Lord

Austen and the Ralph Austens. To which do you allude ?'

'To a Mr. Austen with a most beautiful daughter. I used to know them once at Florence; they were there one winter when the poor mother was alive. I knew her very well. My Priore also knew her; he was with her when she died. I remember thinking the daughter should not have left her when she was so ill.'

'Poor Marion !' exclaimed Alice. 'She could not help it; she would have died for her mother, but she was never allowed a chance of helping her. So the Priore knew her mother? Did he like her? None of us ever saw her.'

'He was deeply interested in her, and very sorry for her,' said Madame di St. Isidoro. 'She seems to have been very reserved, speaking little and timidly—

passionately devoted to her husband. Her death was very sad.'

'I never met anyone who did not know the Austens,' said Georgie. 'They seem to have met everybody in their incessant wanderings.'

'I suppose he lives still—the father, I mean? We took a great dislike to him, and from the fact of the daughter going off to England like that when her mother was so ill, we gathered that she resembled her selfish father.'

'There never were two people more utterly unlike!' exclaimed Alice eagerly. 'Marion is the noblest, most unselfish, perfect character I ever came across, or could even imagine.'

'You speak enthusiastically,' said Marie, smiling. 'She must be very perfect if she is as good as she is beautiful. I was

astonished to hear that she was still unmarried.'

The quick tears rose to Alice's eyes. Lady Bellingham spoke rapidly:

'Our English girls do not marry so young as yours do, Marie. I hope Marion will make a happy marriage soon; in fact, I have every hope that it will be so.'

She spoke emphatically. Madame di St. Isidoro saw Alice's changing colour, and perceived electricity in the air. She spoke gently:

'I hope she will, poor child! It must be a dreadful fate to live with that selfish father; and yet I ought not to say so: such a life would be so glorious a discipline for the soul.'

'Her mother was disciplined quite out of the world,' said Lady Bellingham, with

a quick sigh. 'One could not bear the thought of such a fate for May.'

Alice looked gratefully at her mother. Kitty had been listening eagerly to every word.

'Is it true that she will be married soon?' she asked suddenly, drawing Alice aside. 'Tell me, is it to your brother?'

'No, no; I wish it were. How I wish it were!' said Alice. 'It was only mamma's way of speaking.'

Lady Bellingham did not seem able to leave Kitty alone. She came up to her presently, and began playing with her hair.

'I wish you would wear your hair like other girls, Kitty,' she said. 'I don't think that straight smooth parting is becoming to your little fair face.'

'Handsome is as handsome does,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford in her monotonous

voice. 'Kitty could never be a handsome girl, so she must be content to look like a good one.'

'I don't think a few of those soft little curls let loose on her forehead would take away that,' said Lady Bellingham.

'They would look as if she wished to attract attention.'

'On the contrary, her smooth head is much more remarkable,' said Lady Bellingham. 'And it makes her look less well, poor child!'

'Your kindness will put all sorts of fancies into her head,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford. 'If we go abroad we must make the best of it, and accustom ourselves to endure without complaint the indigestion produced by the unwholesome and unnatural cookery. Kitty was never ill in her life; though she has not much

to boast of in the way of looks, her constitution is robust.'

'Are you quite comfortable in your hotel?' said Madame di St. Isidoro. She fancied that this personal conversation must be painful to the object of it; but Kitty was too meek and too much accustomed to it to mind very much.

'Yes,' answered Mrs. Brown-Clifford; 'the hotel is not bad. I hope you will come and see me, if it is not too much trouble. I am very seldom out.'

'What a wonderful person!' said Marie, when the Brown-Cliffords were gone. 'I never met anyone like her before.'

'I should not have thought the type an uncommon one,' said Lady Bellingham, who had no discernment of character. 'She seems to be without much individuality.'

'She sees further than you think, mamma,' said Georgie. 'Her china-blue eyes are taking everything and everyone in on every side.'

'Her daughter has a look of her,' said Madame di St. Isidoro.

'Yes; she is a little like her,' said Alice. 'Eustace says that when she is old she will be exactly like her.'

'Eustace talks great nonsense if he does say so,' said Lady Bellingham. 'Kitty is not a bit like her mother, and never could be. What nonsense! She would be very pretty indeed, if we could but get her properly dressed.'

'I am not sure that I do not like the smooth, soft hair and little nun-like costume,' said Marie. 'I see now who it was that Paolo meant, when he told me the other day that he had met in the

corridor a child with a white, pure face, like one of Lucca della Robbia's angels ; it must have been Miss Brown-Clifford. I must go now ; it must be twelve o'clock. He will be coming in for breakfast ; and I have to break to him the sad news that Ursel's violin is sold.'

'I think it must have been Don Paolo who was at Ursel's house when Eustace and I were there,' said Alice.

'Very likely ; he is fond of going there.'

'I wish I knew him,' said Lady Bellingham. 'Does he never go into society ?'

'Never ; he has no time. He is very hard-worked ; carrying on, besides other work, an enormous correspondence.'

'Then he would not come and see me ?'

'Indeed, I wish he could ; but I cannot

press upon him things which are of no more importance than to give or accept pleasure. He is over-worked.'

'I hope some happy chance may make us acquainted,' said Lady Bellingham graciously, as Madame di St. Isidoro rose to depart.

Alice could not imagine why her mother so continually commented upon Kitty's delicate looks; she even continued the subject when Eustace came in to tea, asking him whether he had not seen her, and whether he did not think that she looked both ill and out of spirits.

He was bored, and answered that he had not thought about either her or her looks in any respect; and Lady Bellingham gave an aggressive sigh, which made Alice flush scarlet.

CHAPTER IV.

THE next morning Kitty Brown-Clifford came into the Bellinghams' apartment early, and went to Alice's sitting-room. Alice was not there, and as she had an engagement to do some shopping with her, she sat down to wait.

The English newspaper lay on the table; Kitty took it up and began to read, to pass away the time. Alice was a long time coming. Kitty was tired, after the concert the night before, and still

more from the effect of the sleepless nights of which she had complained ; she let the paper fall and lent back in her chair, with her hands tightly clasped, falling into a reverie.

Her reverie was not a very happy one ; she was feeling saddened and oppressed by the self-consciousness her mother's treatment of her had fostered. She was very fond of her new friends, but she could not feel natural and at ease with them ; she felt *gauche* and awkward. At Castleford she had got over much of this feeling ; but it had come back at Santa Chiara, where the two men, Eustace and Joseph Mulroy, were constantly present when she was with her friends. The former spent much of his time with Alice ; he missed the busy home life to which he had been accustomed, and was glad to accompany

her, walking or driving, going to picture galleries, or other sights, as each offered, in order to while away some of the hours that hung so heavily on his hands.

The result of Mrs. Brown-Clifford's foolish training was such that Kitty was overpowered by shyness when in the society of men, in spite of all her strongest resolutions and self-condemnation.

Her life had been a very secluded one, and she had always been the central object of thought of her home; so completely had this been the case that Kitty was often disposed to be wearied to death of her own individuality. Her dress, her attitudes, her manners, even the expression of her face, all were constant sources of comment and marks for observation. This produced an extreme sense of self-distrust; nothing but her innate gentleness

saved her from awkwardness. Her whole young life was subdued and depressed, and even the gentle, trustful religion in which she had found her refuge at times seemed inclined to become morbid in tone.

Mr. St. Aubyn's advice that she should be allowed freedom of intercourse with the Bellingham girls was the wisest that could be given, but even this had failed of late. Georgina's whole time and thoughts were bent upon preparations for her marriage; the commonplace, rather hard way in which she spoke of it gave Kitty some pain and a good deal of astonishme She had not experience enough to recognise that it was to a certain degree an assumed manner, not quite natural to Georgie, but the outcome of a kind of shyness and a good deal of self-dissatisfaction.

Concealed in Kitty's heart was a great

well of romance, an intuition of great and lovely things—the spirit which some call romantic, half mockingly, but which often is but one of God's highest gifts, a lofty imagination, a reflection of things above in the troubled waters of life.

Alice also was no longer the light-hearted, merry companion she used to be. Alice had been going through much during the past year. Her sorrow for Eustace and Marion was extreme, but worst of all was the awakening to the consciousness of the worldliness of her mother and sister; it seemed to her young and rather *borné* disposition to be peculiarly unnatural and distasteful, and it saddened her greatly. Eustace was not improved by his sorrow; to her over-anxious mind it seemed very much the contrary. She fancied that he deteriorated.

He had grown bitter and harsh in his judgments; there were moments in which she was miserable about him. Alice had found a friend in Madame di St. Isidoro, and though as yet she had not spoken to her of her own family troubles, she had formed a very firm and loving friendship with her, which at any moment circumstances might ripen into confidence.

So it was that Kitty found herself less near to her friends at Santa Chiara than she had been at home. Mrs. Brown-Clifford saw it, and in her own mind ascribed it to her daughter's want of attraction; without actually putting it into words, she implied it so often that Kitty became convinced of it, and grew shy even with Alice.

She leant back in her chair, and thought sadly over this disappointment. The time

passed, and Alice did not come. After waiting a considerable time, at last a footstep came across the rooms; the door opened abruptly, and Sir Eustace came in.

Kitty jumped to her feet; her colour came and went; she looked so startled that he could not help smiling as he came forward to shake hands and apologize.

'Do my sisters know that you are here, Miss Clifford? I hope you have not been waiting very long.'

'I don't know. Alice asked me to come and walk with her. I dare say she will be here soon. Indeed, I do not mind waiting in the least. I have the paper;' and she quickly picked it up from the ground.

'I will let Alice know,' said Sir Eustace; and he was turning to leave the room when he caught sight of a packet

of letters on the writing-table—the English letters had just come in—and he went hastily to look at them.

Kitty had taken up the paper and was looking at it, when suddenly a sharp exclamation (almost a little cry) burst from her lips. Eustace turned round hastily, and saw her face as white as a sheet, and her lips quivering.

'What is the matter? What have you seen?' he exclaimed hastily, striding towards her.

Kitty put both her hands over the paragraph.

'It is nothing, nothing!' she exclaimed, the bright colour rushing back into her cheeks. 'I beg, I entreat that you will not look. It is nothing; how could I be so foolish!'

'I beg your pardon,' he said, almost

smiling at her evident terror. 'But surely the paper is public property; you must let me look;' and he took it out of her hands.

Kitty rose to her feet in an agony of shame and confusion. She turned her back to him, and went away to the window. If only the earth would have opened and swallowed up her and her discomfort, she would have been so thankful.

Eustace looked at the paper crumpled by her little trembling hands, and in a small paragraph by itself this advertisement met his eye:

'*On the 12th inst., at St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square, Lord Austen to Marion, only daughter of Ralph Austen, Esq.*'

Kitty stood at the window breathless and trembling, wondering what would

happen next, listening with painful tension to the lightest sound, dreading, yet expecting, some demonstration of the intense suffering the blow must have caused him.

Nothing, only a sort of silence that could be felt. It could not have lasted more than one minute, but it seemed interminable. Then she could bear it no longer. She turned from the window and came forward.

Sir Eustace stood with the paper in his hand; he gave a slight start, and cleared his throat. Kitty's eyes were full of dumb sympathy. She looked up at him, longing to hold out her hand, to say something to comfort him, but he never even perceived it. He cleared his throat again, for his voice was husky.

'I will tell Alice that you are waiting,

Miss Clifford,' he said. 'It is too bad of her;' and then he left the room, carrying the paper with him, and Kitty sank down on a chair, and covered her burning face with her hands.

What must he have thought of her? This obtruded sympathy must have seemed almost an impertinence. She had felt it herself so acutely, that it was hardly possible for her to realize that he had scarcely perceived her existence; that every minor detail of life was swallowed up and obliterated by the news which swept away at a blow the whole hope of his life.

He did not send Alice; he never even went to look for her. His words had been purely mechanical. He went out of doors, as far away from home as he could go.

Kitty sat on, not daring to move; and

when Alice came in half an hour later, she quite started at the sight of her little white face.

'My dearest Kitty, you here? What is the matter—what is it? Has anything happened?'

'Oh, Alice!' exclaimed Kitty, 'have you seen him? Is he dreadfully unhappy?'

'Who? What? I don't understand,' said Alice.

Kitty told her of what she had seen in the paper. She had hardly heard it before she ran out of the room in search of her brother; he was far away by that time, and she came back to her own room to Kitty in great trouble of mind.

'Tell me what happened, Kitty,' she exclaimed. 'Was it in here that he saw it?'

'Yes,' said Kitty, reserving to herself her own share in the disclosure, the involuntary exclamation of which she was so terribly ashamed. 'He saw it in the paper.'

'What did he say?'

'He said nothing; he only turned and left the room. But his face looked terrible, Alice.'

'In what way? do tell me,' she said almost impatiently.

'Blank, stern, as if all the youth and life and hope had gone out of it,' said Kitty, with a sob she could not suppress. 'I have seen him look like that once before.'

'Yes; I know—that day,' said Alice. 'How I wish I knew whether it is true! I can never believe that May would be so faithless.'

'She gave him up,' said Kitty almost

indignantly. 'And if she could do that, one does not wonder that she should do the other.'

'It is a very different thing,' cried Alice. 'One was heroic, the other would be cowardice.'

'Still, she gave him up,' said Kitty, with a sort of firmness which provoked Alice.

'We cannot argue about May,' she said suddenly. 'I don't think you can understand her—she is like nobody else in the world.'

'She ought not to have made him so very miserable,' said Kitty.

She was over-excited, or she would not have spoken like that. Alice did not like it. It gave her a feeling that an outsider was touching upon family secrets. She grew cold.

'We will not discuss Marion,' said

Alice. 'And, in fact, I think it will be better for us to put the whole question aside; it will not bear discussion;' and she turned away her head, trying to hide the tears that would force their way. Kitty saw it, and put her arm round her neck.

'Dear Alice!' she whispered, as she kissed her. But her caress was like the touch on a too sensitive wound. Alice could not bear it. She returned it hastily, and drew away.

'I have never apologized for keeping you waiting so long, Kitty,' she said. 'To tell the truth, I fancied it was to-morrow that we were to shop together, not to-day. I am so sorry.'

'Oh, it does not matter in the least,' said Kitty, her timidity returning in full force. 'I—I don't mind waiting. Perhaps you had rather not go out to-day.'

'No. Let us go,' said Alice. 'I would much rather do so. Georgie and Mr. Mulroy are gone out already. Come, Kitty.'

Kitty rose, and put on her gloves and hat.

'I wish you could be persuaded to buy a prettier hat,' said Alice, almost sharply. 'That is not becoming, is it?'

'We will see what we can find,' said Kitty timidly. 'But I must ask mamma. I have no money, you know.'

'No money? Don't you buy your own clothes?'

'Oh no. Mamma gives me what I want, but never any money. She says she must take precautions.'

Alice laughed. She could not help it. There was a sound in Kitty's voice so like her mother's.

'Let us start, Kitty,' she said.

Kitty, when she returned home after their walk, was very unhappy. She felt as if no one understood her. She was very lonely. She longed to give sympathy, but her sympathy had been rejected. In that close family circle there was no room for outsiders. She felt as if she had intruded on them, and she longed with a great unsatisfied longing for some one kind loving heart on which she might rest her head, and pour out her thoughts without fear of misconception, and with the right to sympathy which only love can give.

CHAPTER V.

EUSTACE BELLINGHAM, at the end of his long ramble in search of comfort, or rather of courage, at length found himself on the Roman road, and outside Ursel's house. The sound of music arrested his steps.

He stood still and listened. Ursel must be practising—he was running up and down delicate little chromatic scales. The sound was new to Eustace. He wondered what made the tone of the instrument so peculiarly sweet, when

the thought flashed across him—it must be the new violin; Ursel must be trying it. He was producing exquisite tones, a power and sweetness combined that must be ecstasy to him.

Eustace saw that the door of the house was open, and he went in. The music attracted him on, and he entered the salon in which the piano stood.

Ursel was standing before the music-stand, on his face an expression of vivid brilliant enjoyment. He looked up and caught sight of Eustace, and gave him a friendly little nod. He had become a frequent guest of late.

'Sit down,' he said. 'You shall hear her speak—my beauty, my glorious violin! Sit down.'

Eustace sat down; he fell into the ways of the maestro, who never left off

touching his instrument, only looked at him over it with kind radiant eyes—eyes that read him through and through.

The music began.

'Let each interpret according to his own ideas,' Ursel had said the day before; but to-day he had a story to tell his hearer, something to comfort him, something to help him over the dark hour of life into which he had entered—and the violin told it well.

It was exquisite music, a marvellous power of execution; so marvellous that it rippled over the strings with no more apparent effort than the mechanism in the throat of a thrush. Through all a minor melody; now taken up by the grand deep tones of the lower chords, now appearing and disappearing through a thousand intricacies; simple, because of its one inten-

tion, in spite of its endless complications. Ursel thought of sorrow interwoven in the chords of life, and sustained his conception throughout.

Before it was over, Eustace had hidden his face on his arms on the table, and sat there without moving.

'And now, what is it, my friend?' said Ursel, laying down the violin and putting his hand on his shoulder. 'Trouble—trouble as usual? That melody always runs through life.'

'You called it discord the other day,' said Eustace, raising his face with a painful smile.

'I was wrong,' said Ursel. 'It cannot be discord, or life would be intolerable. I doubt the capability of human nature to exist in a condition of discord—it is too antagonistic to endurance; and trouble is

our normal condition ; therefore we would rather carry out the idea I have tried to convey to you—the melody in a minor key asserting itself through complicated harmonies. The discord theory would end in the worst discord of all—insanity.'

'Yes,' said Eustace, passing his hand over his brow wearily. 'One is forced back into tune by the hand of old Time.'

'Or, as Don Paolo said, God is the Tuner,' said Ursel reverently. 'How hot and sultry it is to-day ! are you not tired ?'

'I have not been conscious of fatigue till now. Ursel, how selfish I am ! I see you have a new violin. What is the history of it ?'

'Ah, my beauty—my precious treasure !' cried Ursel. 'If, indeed, she is really mine. If you could throw any

light on the mystery, I would indeed thank you!'

'What mystery?'

'It arrived last night lying in its beautiful case, thus. See!' And with childlike eagerness Ursel rapidly brought together the violin-case and the paper in which it was wrapped. 'Some one must have loved it well, and given it a fitting case,' said Ursel.

The case was ebony, inlaid with ivory; it had been relined with care, and fitted with a Bramah lock.

'See, this came with it!' went on Ursel, handing to Sir Eustace a note which had been attached to it.

He opened it, and read:

'This violin is sent to M. Michel Ursel as a gift by one who admires his genius

very greatly, and offers it as a slight tribute to one who will know how to make use of it worthily.'

The note was in Italian, but some slight grammatical error betrayed that it was written by a foreigner.

'It was not you who sent it to me?' said Ursel, looking up suddenly.

'No. I only wish that it had been in my power to do so,' said Eustace. 'It would have been a very great pleasure to me.'

'You are very good.'

'The benefit would have been less to you than to the whole world!'

Ursel bowed and repeated:

'You are too good.'

'Have you told your friend the Priore of St. Onofrio? He will be very glad.'

'Do you also know him?' said Ursel. 'The only time you met here at this house you did not speak. I concluded that you were strangers.'

'I do not know him personally, but we have heard much of him, of course.'

'Ah! I understand. I wish you knew him. He is a good man—a saint; and what also attracts me, he is *fanatico* for music.'

'I could see that when he was listening to you. They say his preaching is wonderful.'

'Yes; he plays on the gamut of human feelings with dexterous fingers. He has been very good to me.'

'Have you known him long?'

'No; a year, little more—since I have been at Santa Chiara.'

'You like the place?'

'Pretty well. Assunta is happiest in her own country. I, perhaps, might prefer Germany. But one place is much the same as another while I have my violin.'

'Music must be all-absorbing,' said Eustace, noticing that the violin rather than Assunta was the indispensable mentioned.

'Yes; Assunta complains of it, poor child! She says I am no companion; doubtless it is quite true,' and he gave a quick sigh.

'Your wife has her own friends?'

'Yes; dozens of female friends, who cackle round her from morning to night. She has scarcely finished her household duties before she is off after them.'

'That is a good thing,' said Eustace; 'it gives you time for that gift of Melusina.'

'Ah, Melusina! she shall be called so,

my beauty, my treasure! Sometimes I can hardly believe that it is I myself who possess a Straduarius. These are happinesses so great, one does not realize them, and cannot grasp them.'

'You would realize soon enough if the happiness were taken from you, and regret that it ever existed,' said Sir Eustace bitterly.

Ursel glanced at him quickly. 'I don't know,' he said; 'the past is a great possession. I have known some lives in which memory was the only joy remaining; you would not grudge them that?'

'I would not grudge anybody the smallest ray of the rare sunshine of life,' said Eustace. 'Well, Melusina is safe in her case; she is not a human being, and the happiness she confers is not cruel as death.'

'There is also the future,' said Ursel, speaking dreamily as if he had not heard. 'With humanity there is always the future; it holds infinite possibilities.'

'If you speak of earthly possibilities,' said Eustace, 'there are memories which contain a germ of bitterness which no future can eradicate, and such a memory is mine.'

'My friend,' said Ursel earnestly, 'you are living and suffering in the present now; the comfort of the past and the possibilities of the future are as yet alike unknown to you. Time, time. There is no healer like time.'

'Have you ever suffered, Ursel?' asked Eustace suddenly.

Ursel paused a moment before he answered, then he passed his hand through his bushy hair with a look of perplexity.

'I do not know,' he said. 'I have thought so at times; but true suffering leaves traces: I have no scars. There is proportion in all things; when I take a bird's-eye view of my life, I see that in the midst of its details I have taken molehills for mountains and ponds for the ocean.'

'You are young to take a bird's-eye view of life,' said Eustace. 'As for myself, I cannot see the wood for the trees.'

Ursel laid his hand on his shoulder. 'I was saying something of the sort to Don Paolo one day,' he said; 'and he made a little rapid movement with his finger upwards. "The bird soars," he said, "and looks down from above."'

Eustace nodded; for the moment he could not speak.

Ursel took up his beloved violin and

began to play. His mind was full of thoughts; he could not express them in words, he brought them out in music—a slow movement like a mother's lullaby to a tired child.

When it was over, Eustace was gone; as the last notes sounded he had gone quietly away. His intercourse with Ursel was very unconventional.

As Eustace walked homewards he suddenly heard his name, and looking up, perceived Joseph Mulroy coming towards him. The kind little man was walking past him, anxious to prove that he had not come out in search of him.

'Ah, Mulroy, out in the country!' exclaimed Eustace, who had experienced a kind of sick weariness of his own thoughts, and was glad to see him.

'We do not often come out on this side of the town,' said Mulroy, turning back to walk with him. 'Georgie does not care for it.'

'I have an attraction here,' said Eustace.

'Ah, Ursel! Have you seen him to-day?'

'Yes; seen him in raptures over the violin. He can hardly contain his feelings.'

'Did you hear him play on it?'

'Yes; it is a very beautiful one—the tone glorious.'

'I thought the tone excellent when I tried it.'

'You play?'

'Yes, a little. I am very fond of it.'

They walked on together silently, but just before reaching home Joseph Mulroy said suddenly:

'Forgive me for mentioning it, Belling-

ham, but don't believe everything you see in the papers.'

'You don't think they are to be trusted,' said Eustace wearily.

'Certainly not. I for one do not believe it in the least;' and he struck the ground with the cane he carried most emphatically.

'Your faith is intact, Joe,' said Eustace bitterly.

'Only write and ask before you make up your mind.'

'To whom should I write?'

'To Mr. Austen. Do do it, I beg of you!'

'I will.'

'My conviction is so strong,' repeated Mr. Mulroy.

Eustace made no answer; they were approaching Palazzo St. Isidoro.

CHAPTER VI.

EUSTACE BELLINGHAM wrote to Mr. Austen, and during the week that elapsed before he could receive a reply he determined to believe in Marion's faithfulness. Alice could not bring herself to believe that she was married, and she repeated her own conviction to her brother so often and with such emphasis that she almost convinced him; but on the eighth day by return of post the answer came.

The letters arrived when they were all

assembled at breakfast, Kitty Brown-Clifford breakfasting with them in her riding-habit, for they were to make an expedition into the mountains on horseback that day.

The colour came and went in Alice's face as she saw her brother glance at his letters and make some trivial excuse to leave the room.

Lady Bellingham pushed away her plate and followed him. To her the anxiety was very keen, and perhaps her conscience was not quite clear about that paragraph in the papers ; she looked and felt painfully uncomfortable.

Eustace was not in the little salon appropriated to his use, and his bedroom door was locked. In answer to her repeated knocks he threw open the door and came out.

'You will like to see Ralph Austen's letter, mother?' he said.

'Don't go, Eustace!' she exclaimed, trying to detain him.

'I have an engagement,' he answered, 'and the letter will not bear discussion.'

He had forgotten his promise to join the mountain expedition. Lady Bellingham could not keep him; she took the letter and sat down, feeling suddenly faint and uneasy.

It was short, and to the point.

'My dear Bellingham,

'I cannot bring myself to regret the premature announcement that has appeared in the *Times*, if it tends to restore your long-troubled peace of mind. That it is a little premature is a sufficient answer to the question you put to me

with what the French call a certain *brutalité.* I wish I could assure you to the contrary.

'Yours affectionately,

'RALPH AUSTEN.'

Lady Bellingham dashed down the letter with an indignant movement.

'Odious man, to write so flippantly. A little premature! Of course, that means that the thing is settled, so the announcement will do no harm. I don't see how it can do any harm,' she repeated to herself uneasily.

Rising from her seat, she called Alice.

'There is no peace anywhere in this house!' she exclaimed pettishly. 'Come into Eustace's room and read this.'

Alice read in silence, her mother watching her face.

'What do you think of it?' she said.

'Think of it!' cried Alice; 'the letter is an intolerable one, heartless, odious, and impertinent. But the fact itself is such, that really it does not so much matter in what terms it is announced.'

'May has consented, you think?'

'Evidently. He underlines *a little prematurely*. He wishes us to make no mistake about it. And I had such implicit faith in her! I do not think that I shall ever believe in anyone again.'

'Heroics, Alice!' said her mother. 'You can't be faithful when there exists nothing to which to be faithful. May has behaved like the sensible woman I always knew her to be. I admire her for her strength of character.'

'And I hate her!' cried Alice, the hot

tears rushing to her eyes. 'Mamma, do not speak of her; I cannot bear it.'

'You are a foolish child, without a grain of common-sense.'

'I hope I may never have that cruel, worldly, heartless quality you call common-sense, but which I call self-interest!' cried Alice passionately.

'My dear, you forget yourself!'

'I can't help it. Poor Eustace! This is too hard. Oh, mother, this is too cruel!'

'I shall leave you to recover yourself,' said Lady Bellingham, 'and to try to regain your self-control. Remember you are not to talk in this wild way before Kitty. I will not have it. It is ridiculous to describe Eustace as heart-broken and miserable.'

'I will say nothing to her,' said Alice.

'I have not the slightest wish to speak of such things before a comparative stranger; but for her, things might still have been happy and true and honourable.'

'My dear, I am very thankful that nobody but myself is present to hear you talk such nonsense.'

Georgina's voice was heard calling outside.

'Alice, Alice! are you not coming? The horses are waiting; we ought to start.'

'You see, Alice, you are keeping them waiting.'

'I cannot go, mamma,' said Alice; 'I could not possibly go on an expedition to-day.'

'But Kitty cannot go alone with Georgie and Mr. Mulroy; it would be too dull for her.'

'Oh, she will get on perfectly well! Georgie and Joseph are modern lovers. Georgie cannot endure *têtes-à-tête*, and he is learning his lesson at last.'

'Do not speak like that,' said Lady Bellingham.

'I too am learning my lesson,' answered Alice. 'And it is a bitter one. Eustace and Joseph and I were not made for the nineteenth century.'

'Then you will not go? They must be told.'

Georgie's voice again called her from below.

'No, I cannot. If you are going downstairs, will you tell them, mamma?'

Lady Bellingham went down, and Alice remained alone.

She felt very unhappy, more unhappy than she had ever been before. She sat

down before the writing-table, and took up a leather photograph-case that was lying on it. The case was fastened by a spring, but Alice knew the trick well, and opened it.

She sat motionless, gazing at the portrait of Marion. It was a beautiful photograph, Marion standing in a very simple attitude, with her hands tightly clasped, looking straight at the beholder. There was a very grave, gentle expression on the lovely lips and in the large eyes. The photograph had caught the very trick of her soft hair where it curled on the brow and was slightly dishevelled on the temples.

Alice pressed it to her lips; it was as if she were saying farewell to one who had died, and was parted from her for ever. She had loved May with that

passionate love that one woman sometimes has for another, to whom she looks up with an admiration and almost worship as to a saint.

That kiss was a farewell to the ideal of her youth. May had proved faithless, and she would trust no one again—never believe in love, or strength, or constancy, on earth. She shut the case, laid down her head on the table, and sobbed bitterly.

Lady Bellingham very seldom went out in the morning ; but as soon as the three had departed with much unwillingness on their expedition, she descended hastily and went to call on Mrs. Brown-Clifford.

She could hardly have explained even to herself why she did so ; it was probably that she wanted to be put once more into harmony with herself and her

own ideas of all that was desirable, and she fancied that her neighbour might help to do so.

Mrs. Brown-Clifford was sitting alone in her hotel-salon. She had contrived to give the room something of the appearance of her own English home. Her chair was in the same place, her table beside her with its little paper books of instruction on all the forms of knitting and crochet that had ever been invented, and a whole pile of English novels.

She rose and took off her large spectacles when Lady Bellingham came in.

'How good of you to come and see me in the morning!' she said, with something approaching animation in her voice. 'I was thinking to myself that it was horribly dull abroad, and wishing myself back in England.'

'If you find it so dull, what made you leave your comfortable home and come here?' said Lady Bellingham softly.

A kind of blush rose in Mrs. Brown-Clifford's large face.

'You may well ask,' she answered. 'It was not my own doing; but there is something unwise in asking advice and then flying in the face of it.'

'You followed advice?'

'I did. Your brother, Mr. St. Aubyn's advice.'

'He is a wise man,' said Lady Bellingham thoughtfully. 'I know no one with more forethought and penetration.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford, 'for, to tell the truth, I was beginning to doubt both of those qualities, and to wish I had not listened to him, and were now safe at home.'

'Mrs. Clifford,' said Lady Bellingham, drawing her chair closer, 'I am sorry to hear you say that. I should wish you to know that my great wish is that your visit to Italy should be to you the beginning of much satisfaction.'

'I don't know that personally I want any more satisfaction in life,' said the old lady placidly. 'My sister and I should be perfectly satisfied and contented if Kitty were married, and I don't see any prospect of that at present, in spite of what Mr. St. Aubyn said.'

'What did my brother say?' said Lady Bellingham, trying not to appear too eager.

'He told me that your son, Sir Eustace, would be an exceedingly desirable husband for my daughter.'

'Did he speak of the past—a former engagement?'

'I know all about that, and I do not in the least object to it. Few men marry their first love. Mr. Brown-Clifford did; but there are exceptions to every rule.'

'It was an unfortunate affair altogether,' began Lady Bellingham; 'but we are greatly consoled by the news that Miss Austen has entirely recovered from it, and is on the eve of marriage with her cousin, Lord Austen.'

'I thought I saw in the papers that the marriage had taken place.'

'The announcement was premature,' answered Lady Bellingham; 'but her father writes this morning it is to be.'

'Recovery from an affair of the sort is a mere matter of time with most people,' went on Mrs. Brown-Clifford. 'Mr. Brown-Clifford was very romantic. Some of his nonsense has been inherited by Kitty.'

'Kitty looks ill,' said Lady Bellingham hastily. 'What is the matter with her? I mean really—we are alone.'

'There is nothing the matter with her that I know of. I dare say she will be all right when we go home again.'

'Pray do not do that. I hardly know how to put it to you; but I am fond of Kitty, just as if she were my own child. I should be grateful to you if you would wait a little longer.'

'I have not been prudent,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford. 'Your brother assured me that my over-precautions would destroy my daughter's future. I relaxed them, and I regret it.'

'You do not mean,' said Lady Bellingham, lowering her voice and speaking very eagerly—'you do not mean that you think Kitty cares for my boy?'

'I will not go so far as that,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford, unfolding her knitting, while her head shook tremulously. 'But I wish we were safe at home again.'

'If I thought so,' exclaimed Lady Bellingham, 'I would move heaven and earth to secure their marriage!'

'You would do that anyhow,' said the old lady dryly.

Lady Bellingham forced a little laugh.

'I admit that there is nothing I would welcome more,' she said. 'Dear Mrs. Clifford, it would add a thousandfold to my zest in the matter if Kitty cares.'

'I don't say that Kitty cares,' said her mother quickly. 'But I will say this, I am disappointed in your son. Mr. St. Aubyn spoke of him with enthusiasm, called him the finest fellow he knew, and prepared me for a paragon. What do I

find? In physique, no exaggeration, certainly; but in all else! He has grown very dull, scarcely opening his lips; he is very irritable now, to judge by the way he bites his moustache; he pays no attention to my daughter, and he looks as if all the life and sparkle of existence had gone out of him. Flat champagne!' she said, shaking her head mournfully; 'perfectly flat champagne!'

Lady Bellingham bit her lips hard, and had a great struggle to mask her mortification and displeasure sufficiently to enable her to smile again, and say softly:

'But with all these disadvantages, dear Mrs. Clifford, your sweet little Kitty loves him.'

'She doesn't.'

'Ah, we won't dispute about words—mine was too strong a one! Well, well,

we shall soon see a difference in my poor boy now that, perforce, his mind will be turned from his tragic muse to the charming domestic qualities nearer at hand. You will soon see his old bright smile again.'

Mrs. Brown-Clifford emitted a sound that was something between a snort and a grunt. She drew her shawl round her.

'Take care what you do, Lady Bellingham,' she said; 'young people are not so easy to manage as we old ones fancy.'

'But, dear Mrs. Clifford,' said Lady Bellingham, in her softest voice (and her voice could be very soft when she chose), 'you do not really mean to say that you think a young man's first love can really influence his whole after-life. I mean to say, of course, one sympathizes with it, and one hates to see them suffer, and one

would do what one could to prevent it; but still you must confess that, viewed from the common-sense of experience, one divests the feeling of an immense amount of exaggeration, and it reassumes its right proportion in life.'

'I suppose all elderly people think so.'

Lady Bellingham did not like being called an elderly person; she had never looked upon herself in that light. She gave a little forced laugh.

'It is perhaps when one's first youth is over that one begins to consider these things,' she said. 'Later on, I suppose——'

'Yes; I suppose later on sympathy takes the place of obduracy,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford. 'Second childhood, you would call it.'

'Dear me!' exclaimed Lady Belling-

ham, trying hard not to betray how pettish she felt. 'You will not allow me to come to the point.'

'I imagined there must be a point somewhere that had to be reached.'

'The point is this: my son's engagement is at an end; he is naturally unhappy now, but he is a reasonable man, and will soon reconcile himself to the inevitable.'

'I suppose you look upon my daughter as the inevitable to which he is to reconcile himself?' exclaimed the lady, her head shaking more than ever.

'You put things so—allow me to say—so crudely. What I meant was simply this: I want him to marry your daughter; she herself wishes it; I want you to wish it also—I cannot put it more plainly.'

Mrs. Brown-Clifford did not speak for a moment; she folded and unfolded her hands restlessly. Lady Bellingham sat watching her most eagerly.

'Lady Bellingham,' she said suddenly, 'I am not like you. I believe in love, to a certain extent; I ought to believe in it, for Mr. Brown-Clifford——'

Lady Bellingham waved her hand in uncontrollable impatience. She faltered, then steadied herself, and went on:

'I see you have no patience for it; but I wish to speak plainly. If Kitty were a fine, handsome, or even pretty girl, the sort of girl whom men fall in love with, I should say, I will not for the world deprive her of the right of her youth and beauty—honest, devoted love-making. It may be nonsense, but it has its value for all that; and that you under-

value it so systematically only shows that you never experienced it.'

'My dear Mrs. Clifford——'

'Hush! listen. You were much too wise—but there, we are not all made alike. Let me go on. Kitty is a quiet, humdrum, old-fashioned little person. I don't say that I have brought her up wisely—I am beginning to have my doubts; but I have tried to do my best. She likes your son. If he marries her, it will be from no mercenary motive—he is a thorough gentleman—it will be because —well, because if he cannot get the lady he loves, he will turn to the lady who cares for him, and because you have teased him into it. Let me finish. I think he will make a kind husband; I will take him on trust. I have brought up Kitty in an unromantic school; she

will not expect much. It will turn out as well, probably, as most marriages, I have no doubt ; only——'

'No "only," dear Mrs. Clifford, I entreat ; your view is so wise, so far-seeing——'

'It is far-seeing enough to know that Mr. Brown-Clifford would never have allowed it !' exclaimed the old lady ; and rising abruptly from her chair, she pushed aside Lady Bellingham with both her fat hands, and left the room, leaving that lady thoroughly taken aback at so unceremonious a proceeding. She waited some minutes, then, finding that there was no sign of her hostess's return, she went home again, satisfied with the main results of her visit, although burning with dislike to the good lady who had treated her with such scant courtesy.

CHAPTER VII.

THE days passed slowly away at Santa Chiara. Sir Eustace would have given half he possessed to get away, but he could not go before his sister's marriage, which was to take place in the early spring. His mother would accept no excuse, would take no refusal; and in his restlessness he reconciled himself to his enforced stay by thinking that England would not be better, after all, than this hateful little foreign town with its dull sleepy beauty which had long ceased to have any charm for him.

The only thing he cared for was to sit in Ursel's bare yellow-washed salon and listen to that wonderful music which seemed to echo every thought and longing that passed over brain and soul. He came and went as he pleased, scarcely speaking, making little or no comment on the music, listening while his cigar went out, and his soul shone out of wistful, glistening eyes. Ursel's friends thought him an eccentric Englishman with no manner or sociability about him ; Ursel understood him with a subtle intuition. But one among the frequent guests watched him with daily increasing interest, watched him at first with the strange metaphysical love of analyzing human suffering which belongs to the student of human nature, gradually ripening into the holy longing of the priest to comfort, perhaps to save.

Don Paolo used to walk home with him

afterwards, talking of common things with the originality of a charming talker. Eustace began to take pleasure in his society, to value the fast-ripening acquaintance. His evenings, under the spell of Ursel's music and the long walks home, became to him the cup of water in a thirsty land.

And all this time, gently, with cautious, clever hands, his mother was drawing the net round him. She was very kind to him, so kind and tender that Alice thought, regretfully, that she had indeed misjudged her, and blamed herself severely for her own hard judgment.

Lady Bellingham did all she could to make home pleasant to her son. She never again uttered one of the hard sayings about love and common-sense, on which she used to harp so incessantly; on the contrary, her

kind and gentle words and sentiments were always ready for him.

Very gently, with consummate tact, Lady Bellingham drew Kitty more and more into the family circle; but here she sometimes almost lost patience. Kitty could not, or would not, show to advantage when Eustace was present; no amount of drawing-out would produce more than gentle monosyllables, no fun more than the frightened little laugh which bore so strong a resemblance to a schoolgirl's giggle.

Alice would do nothing to help. She could not avoid perceiving her mother's drift, although she blamed herself, and tried to believe that she was mistaken; but the very idea of it froze up the dawn of affection she had once felt for her poor little friend, and made her positively unjust to her.

And so the weeks went by, and the last day before the wedding came.

Georgie had been quite unlike herself all day. At the very end of the courtship which she had received so coolly, and with so studied an effort to be matter-of-fact, her courage gave way, and, to her infinite disgust and loss of self-esteem, she found herself a commonplace and very tearful girl, all her theories vanishing in the greatness of the approaching change.

The two sisters sat together in their little sitting-room ; Alice on a low chair, Georgie sitting at her feet hiding her face in her lap. It was nearly dark, but they would not have the light brought in ; Georgie hoped that no eye but her sister's would behold her breaking-down.

'I am so ashamed of myself, Alice,' she cried almost passionately. 'After all I

have said, and thought, and believed, to be like this at the last !'

'But what is it ? what is it, darling ?'

'I thought myself so wise, the very personification of good sense and prudence. I calculated all the pros and cons with such nicety ; this marriage seemed such an admirable plan, so desirable in every way.'

'Georgie, Georgie ! you do not regret it now ?'

'I suppose you cannot understand !' exclaimed her sister, pushing back her hair. 'You are so uncomplicated and simple in your honest milkmaid-belief in love and marriage ; but I am not like that. I thought it all such nonsense. I had no patience with Eustace and his folly ; it was so eminently unpractical, and I could not see the force of it.'

'Darling,' said Alice sadly, 'do not go on like this now!'

'But I must; I want you at least to understand me. I am indignant with myself because I cannot keep up my own traditions. Alice, Alice! I can see nothing now of these sensible arguments. I can see nothing and feel nothing but that Joe, poor fellow, whom I have half laughed at, half tolerated only, is greater a thousand times than I am, because he knows how to love, and what it is to love.'

'And you, Georgie dearest, you are learning now?'

'I don't know;' and Georgie laughed and cried together. 'I can't give up my opinions so quickly as all that. It is not for this I said I would marry him; but I suppose, after all, it is better if one does love one's husband.'

'Oh, it is better! How can you doubt it, darling?'

'For better and for worse,' said Georgie.

'Ah, your theories will carry you through the "better," but you will require mine for the "worse."'

'I suppose you are right; but if I give up, Alice, and acknowledge that I do love this small, ugly, awkward husband that will be mine, with all my heart, I shall be as great a donkey as Eustace.'

Her voice was almost hysterical, but Alice did not even smile.

'You will tell him, Georgie? You will not grudge him that happiness?'

'I don't know—I cannot say.'

'His engagement has not been much happiness to him yet.'

'He would not say so.'

'No, he would not admit it; but it is

true. He has looked so wistful, so disappointed for so long.'

'It was not my fault, Alice. I told him to expect nothing else.'

'Then he will be the gladder.'

'Poor Joe! After all, Alice, it comes to this: he is a thousand times too good for me, and if I really thought of his happiness I should break off the engagement now.'

'I think he would prefer to be the judge of his own happiness,' said Alice, smiling radiantly. 'Oh, Georgie darling, you will be happy now; you have come to your own true self, and the hard worldly crust is melting away.'

'You will triumph over me.'

'No, no! only thank God over you, darling; for you and Joe will be happy now.'

'I hate it!' she exclaimed vehemently;

but Alice only laughed, and petted and coaxed her.

She rose presently, and went to look at her eyes in the glass, to see whether they were red. They told tales too decidedly for her to face the lamps, so she would not rejoin the others.

Presently Kitty came gently in. Alice made a little movement, as if she did not welcome the interruption. Kitty heard rather than saw it, and she spoke fast and timidly:

'Georgie dear, I will not keep you a moment. I only came to bring you my wedding-present; it has only just arrived. Mamma and I were so much afraid that it would not arrive in time; and you see it was almost late. Georgie dear, *do* like it!' And she put a velvet case into her hands.

Georgie opened it, and exclaimed at the

beauty of the great diamond and ruby ring it contained.

'Oh, Kitty, it is too beautiful! What a splendid present!' she exclaimed with enthusiasm.

'It is indeed beautiful!' said Alice.

Something in her voice struck on little Kitty's sensitive nerve—something wanting in cordiality. She scarcely heeded Georgie's ecstasies, or felt her eager kisses; she was watching Alice, listening anxiously for her next words.

'I think it is the most exquisite ring I ever saw!' cried Georgie, in her enchantment.

'I am so glad you like it,' said Kitty, rather tremulously.

Alice took her hand kindly, with a touch of compunction for her own hard feelings.

'How cold you are, Kitty!' she exclaimed.

'This warm evening your little fingers should not be so cold.'

Kitty trembled a little; the soft tears rose to her eyes.

'It is nothing,' she said.

'You are nervous, Kitty,' Alice went on. 'Poor child! what should make you so nervous?'

'I am not very well.'

Kitty was glad that the door opened and Lady Bellingham came in, bringing a flood of light into the little sitting-room, to summon them out of the dark and quietness into the other room.

Georgie could not face it—she ran away upstairs; but Lady Bellingham took the other two away with her. Kitty looked very pretty as she came into the drawing-room, with wide dazzled eyes, from the darkness into light.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE next day the marriage took place, Georgie in bridal splendour, her only bridesmaid her sister, who looked sweeter and fairer than the bride herself.

Georgie had finished all her crying the evening before ; she was a very quiet, gentle bride, all the brilliance and sharpness of her ordinary manner softened into a becoming gravity that was full of sweetness.

Eustace, when he kissed his sister and felt her clinging to him as the last good-

byes were said, felt that the tie between them was stronger than it had ever been before. He had never cared for this sister as he had for Alice, missing the womanly sympathy that he had fancied she did not possess. For a long time there had been a kind of tacit antagonism between himself and Georgie; they could not disguise the fact that neither approved of the other's conduct or character, and they had drifted apart.

Eustace came into Alice's room when all was over, and threw himself listlessly into a chair.

'So that is over,' he said. 'The first volume of Georgie's life is closed; her behaviour to-day made me augur better for poor Mulroy's happiness than I should have done a week ago. I did not suspect her of so much feeling.'

'A good deal of her talk was nineteenth-century bravado,' said Alice. 'Her heart is very loving; and what am I to do without her!' Her eyes filled with tears.

'You must take up that gentle little Clifford girl,' said her brother kindly. 'I shan't be happy leaving you, Alice, unless you make something of a companion of her.'

'Do you like her, Eu?' said his sister very suddenly.

'Of course; she is quiet and unobtrusive. I don't suppose she has an opinion in the world. After all, after the specimens of women one sees in this world, that sort is refreshing.'

Alice fancied he half alluded to his mother and Georgie, and she exclaimed indignantly:

'Women ought to have character. I

should think you were the last person to admire a nonentity.'

'I only said it was refreshing,' he answered with a yawn, 'so you need not fire up so, Alice. I am sick of powerful emotions and such stuff; after all, perhaps my mother is right as to the superiority of the domestic element.'

His tone struck Alice with a sharper pang than she had ever experienced before.

'Eustace!' she cried, 'if you lose faith you will break my heart!'

'They say,' said Eustace, 'that it is easy to make good Romanists out of Protestants of the narrow order, because the process enlarges their minds and faith; but that, on the contrary, it is exceedingly dangerous to convert a Romanist to Protestantism. The reason is obvious, quite apart from the merits of the creeds. You can always learn

to believe more from the less; the difficulty is, when you begin to unlearn, to know where to stop and draw in your too widely diffused faith. It is apt to land you nowhere.'

'Darling, do not speak like that!'

'We shall have Georgie that most amiable spectacle, a doting wife, an enthusiastic votary at the shrine of Hymen, you will see; and I who have believed too much am proportionately cured. Don't look so unhappy, child; it is an excellent thing, my mother would say.'

'And May?'

'I forbid you to speak of her!' he exclaimed passionately. 'My one hope is not to hear her mentioned, so that I should not be forced to think of her. Faith dies hard, you see;' and he forced a little laugh, so bitter that Alice could not restrain her tears.

'When do you go away?' she said presently, as soon as she could master her voice.

'On Thursday; my mother made me promise to stay till then. And Ursel plays on Wednesday night at the Opera-house, so I do not so much mind staying till then.'

'I am glad I shall have you just for three more days,' she said in a choked voice. 'I am afraid it has been very dull for you here for a long time.'

'You have done your best to prevent its being so,' he said, touched by the dejection of his favourite sister; and he stooped down and kissed her.

The afternoon dragged on in the listless weary way that always seems so endless to the survivors of a wedding-party. In the evening the Brown-Cliffords and Madame

di St. Isidoro came in; the Bellinghams welcomed their arrival with relief.

'What will you say,' said Marie di St. Isidoro, 'if I betray the fact that Ursel is actually in the house? He is upstairs with my Priore; he came in about ten minutes ago; he wanted to consult him about some poor opera-singer who is ill, or hurt, or something. I did not ask them to come down; I thought I would speak to you first. I know what you must all be feeling—very sorrowful, very dull; but we French and Italians cannot judge you strange inhabitants of an island. We, under such circumstances, should welcome a distraction; you, perhaps, cherish your gloom.'

Even Lady Bellingham laughed.

'Only invite them, Marie,' she said. 'It will be the greatest boon.'

Madame di St. Isidoro nodded and smiled, and went away upstairs again.

'It will be something to induce Don Paolo to come and see us at last,' said Alice; and she was a little astonished to see her brother greet the Priore as a well-known friend, when, five minutes later, he and Ursel came in, escorted triumphantly by Madame di Isidoro.

Don Paolo was introduced to Lady Bellingham, and went and sat down by her, talking in fluent English, to her relief, for she particularly disliked talking Italian; and Ursel came up to the little group of young people who surrounded Madame di St. Isidoro.

'We can have no music after all,' she said regretfully. 'The maestro has not brought Melusina.'

'She is asleep,' said Ursel gleefully;

'asleep in her bed of ebony and ivory on a red velvet cushion. I wonder how, I wonder whence, she came!'

And he looked searchingly at the little group of English faces before him. To him they seemed the personification of English wealth, in their graceful evening dress. All the faces looked innocent; only Eustace nodded lightly, and said:

'Ah, maestro! like a falling star she shot out of space; and one fine morning you will wake and find the casket open, and the star shot back whence it came.'

'There are some gifts that end thus,' said Ursel, and a shade of melancholy came over his thoughtful face. 'Have these signori ever heard of Niccola Calabrese?'

'The singer?'

'The contralto singer. Some said "Tancredi" was written for her; her Orsini was

the finest ever heard; and when she sang the "Orfeo," they said Orfeo himself had returned. She was the daughter of an innkeeper at Sora. An *impresario* heard her; she was trained; she sang for two years. One night as she came home from the theatre some one said that the fire-flies were more numerous than the sands of the sea. Fancy caring for such trivialities! She must needs go down to the green water-meadows on the outskirts of the town, where the marsh-plants smell sweet and dank, and the fire-flies dance a dance of living fire on the hot wild nights. The damp marsh-fever touched her throat, laid a hand on the magnificent chest which produced those organ-like notes. Poor Niccola! she never sang another note!'

'Does she live still?—what does she do?' cried Alice, while Kitty leant forward

with parted lips and earnest sympathetic eyes.

'Yes, she lives still. She makes the most wonderful artificial flowers; she is celebrated for her art; and she goes about croaking and wheezing like an old tin-kettle!'

'Did it break her heart? Is she very miserable?' said Kitty.

Ursel paused.

'No,' he said; 'she is one of the most light-hearted merry creatures.'

'Well,' said Eustace, smiling, 'have you not caused us to waste our sympathies, my friend?'

'I asked no sympathy for her, but for the world to whom her art was lost,' answered Ursel gravely.

'One cannot understand her being so gay after having once enjoyed and then lost such a gift,' said Alice.

'Ah, signora!' said Ursel, 'when one is young one finds it hard to forgive the cure of such wounds as these; but Nature herself should correct us. The grass grows over the grave, though the grave itself is still there.'

'Then there is no cure?' said Kitty softly.

'No; but it is hidden—the green grass, the returning cheerfulness and smiles, like poor Niccola; but the grave is there!'

'And the moral of it all is—never be tempted to run after fire-flies or any such foolish Will-o'-the-wisp kind of allurements,' said Madame di St. Isidoro. 'And that moral is a very difficult one to inculcate; we all of us have a leaning to the pursuit of fire-flies.'

Lady Bellingham overheard the last words.

'I hope you are preaching wisdom to my foolish young people!' she exclaimed gaily.

'There are worse things in the world than fire-flies, madamina,' said Don Paolo to his mother. 'Why this attack on their pretty characters?'

'Because, like the lady our good maestro has been telling us about, we may chance to lose a great and substantial advantage in an airy and unsubstantial pursuit.'

'Ah, ah! it is metaphorical, I perceive.'

'So metaphorical that we are getting out of our depth,' said Sir Eustace, to whom the conversation gave more pain than he cared to face.

The Priore joined them, and the conversation changed to lighter topics.

CHAPTER IX.

THE next morning Lady Bellingham rose with a settled purpose in her mind. She was about to play her master-stroke, and her very soul quaked within her at the prospect that lay before her.

She could not speak at breakfast, and could hardly eat; a circumstance so unusual that Alice was quite anxious about it. She fancied that her mother was fretting over the loss of Georgie, and wished that she had more sympathy and interests in com-

mon with her, so that she could hope to become as much of a companion to her as her sister had always been.

But Lady Bellingham did not heed, and probably never even saw, Alice's tender little attentions to her; she was so absorbed in the thought that had now become the one paramount scheme of her life.

She let the whole day slip by, wanting courage to begin; but, with twilight, courage and opportunity came together, and she passed her hand through her son's arm, and spoke rather huskily:

'Eustace, I want to talk to you; come to my room.'

'Very well, mother,' he said with a sigh. He always hated conversations that began with such a formula, they had been productive of so much pain to him; but he followed her resignedly.

She sat down by her writing-table, and began to open and shut the drawers nervously. He stood beside her, leaning against the window, looking out into the dull narrow street, in which the hum of life always seemed to increase as daylight declined.

'Eustace dear, I want to talk to you about business.'

'Yes, mother.'

'But don't stand looking into the street like that!' she exclaimed impatiently. 'Cannot you listen to me more attentively?'

He turned obediently, and sat down with a weary sigh.

'Things are in a very serious condition,' she said. 'There is no doubt about it. I have an enormous amount of bills that I cannot pay.'

'That is a misfortune, but it is scarcely my fault, mother,' he said.

'Did I say it was? but there are, unfortunately, rumours that the people who hold the great mortgages on Castleford intend to call them in.'

'Impossible!' and he started to his feet.

'It is too true. Mr. Calloway writes very kindly to warn me of it, and to ask me for your address.'

'But even should it be true, there would be no difficulty in finding fresh mortgagees.'

'To some extent, no; but to the full extent it will be impossible, so Mr. Calloway tells me. The estate, at its present reduced rental, will not bear it.'

'I suppose you are certain of your facts, mother.'

'Only too certain. I only repeat to you what Mr. Calloway writes; perhaps you would prefer seeing his letters yourself.'

'If you do not mind.'

She opened a drawer, took out one or two letters, and, handing them to him, leant back in her chair, anxiously scanning his face.

Eustace read them through carefully, then laying them down said:

'I will see Calloway and speak to him on the subject on Friday. I will send him a telegram to meet me in London. He is an alarmist, as you know, and all may not be as black as he paints it.'

'It is black enough, even allowing for a certain amount of exaggeration.'

'Yes,' he answered gloomily. 'The prospect is not an alluring one.'

'My poor boy!' exclaimed Lady Bellingham; then suddenly changing her tone, 'But I think I can hardly pity you when I see you so intensely blind to your own interests.'

'Not at all,' he said. 'My interests are of vital importance to me. How can I show it better, in order to please you?'

'Your are wilfully blind, Eustace.'

'My dear mother!'

'It is such nonsense,' she exclaimed, tapping her foot on the floor, 'for a man in your position, on the very verge of ruin, to hesitate when wealth and ease and happiness are actually at your feet!'

'I do not understand.'

'Of course I am thinking of your marrying.'

He made an impatient gesture.

'Cannot you be satisfied with what you have already done in that matter, mother?'

'What have I done? I have done nothing.'

'On that point we differ.'

The tears rushed to her eyes. His tone

was so cold and constrained, it seemed to frighten her, as if for the first time she caught sight of some barrier between herself and her son that might some day become insurmountable.

'Eustace,' she exclaimed, with a kind of appeal in her voice, 'can you never, never see how deeply and devotedly I have your interest at heart?'

'I know it too well, mother,' he answered, with an impatient movement. 'Have I ever hinted to the contrary?'

'Then do—do listen to me!'

'Am I not listening?'

'When I tell you that you are blind to your own interests, I mean it really, practically. If, now that your engagement to —I mean, now that all hope of a marriage with May is over, you would consent to think of marrying some one else—— No,

no ; don't look like that ! It can never be the same, I admit ; but still, when men have failed in that way, they are often ready to be satisfied and very contented with a little quiet, gentle, domestic wife who loves them.'

'I suppose you mean Kitty Brown-Clifford,' said Eustace wearily. 'But I don't suppose that her poor little fortune would satisfy your ideas, mother.'

'Her poor little fortune !' exclaimed Lady Bellingham ; but she stopped herself hastily.

Was it possible that he did not know ? A rapid conviction came upon her that he certainly did not know, owing to Mrs. Brown-Clifford's perpetual precautions. Kitty would always be supposed to have the prospect of inheriting her mother's comfortable fortune, the pretty house of moderate size, with all its evidences of comfortable ease, but nothing more.

Lady Bellingham was thankful that she had arrested her exclamation in time. To know that Kitty was a very great heiress, indeed, would so completely change Sir Eustace's ideas that she felt that her wishes would be altogether in vain.

'Eustace,' she said, 'you speak too contemptuously of a very comfortable fortune. It would not require so very much money,' she said wistfully, 'to enable you to live at home, and look after your property. Remember that it is your home after all, and how much you have loved it.'

'Mother, why do you go on and on with the same old story? Sometimes I think you like to torment me.'

'It is all for your good.'

With what bitter distaste did that constant *refrain* fall upon his ears! Lady Bellingham might have been startled if she

had been able to see into her son's hot, rebellious spirit, to have understood that everything had become so bitter and distasteful to him that he was ready to turn to anything as a refuge from his discouragement and the fatal feeling of want of interest in anything, with which the victim has to fight as Laocoon fought the serpents that encircled him.

But there is no creature on earth so merciless as a woman who sees but one aim in life, and has absorbed all her faculties into its attainment.

'I have something to tell you,' she said, her lips turning very white. 'I want to excite in you some feeling towards Kitty—if not for your own sake, for hers.'

'She is a very good little girl,' he said. 'I like her very much.'

'Ah, she is more than that. Alice said

one day that she thought that if men allowed women to choose their wives for them, that there would be fewer unhappy marriages; and I think it is true. You see, we women know so much better than men what other women are. Now, little Kitty would make the dearest, most charming little wife, she is so sweet and docile, with a tender loving nature; and if she was dressed properly she would be very pretty indeed.'

'I dare say,' he said indifferently.

'Would it not do?' she said wistfully.

'I think Miss Brown-Clifford worthy of a better fate than to marry a man who has nothing—not even affection—to offer her,' he said stiffly.

'But if she does not think so,' said Lady Bellingham, speaking with dry lips.

Eustace started. 'I do not think you ought to say that!' he exclaimed.

'There are times, Eustace, when it is the greatest mistake not to speak plainly, and this is one of them. I wish to be quite open with you. You and Kitty have been much thrown together of late. She is a very simple little thing, unaccustomed to attention. She has not seen much of the world; she has had none of the silly girl-friends who talk without cease about lovers and such nonsense. With a simple girl like that it does not do to trifle; things go deep.'

He shook his head impatiently.

'It is of no use to deny it,' Lady Bellingham went on; 'and if I were to allow myself to be deterred by false delicacy now, I should be incurring a grave responsibility. Kitty has learnt to care for you——'

'Mother!'

'Let me go on—to care for you a great deal too much for her own peace of mind.

You have yourself noticed how ill she has been looking, that she is quite changed from what she was.'

'I should be absolutely absurd in my conceit, and contemptible, if I allowed myself to believe you, mother,' he said indignantly.

He was holding a little paper-knife in his hands, and in his excitement he snapped it in two.

The breakage jarred on his mother's nerves.

'Take care!' she said pettishly. 'You have broken it; it is too tiresome!'

'I beg your pardon!' he exclaimed. 'I am sorry if it was of any value. And now can I go? Or have you anything else to say to me?'

Lady Bellingham felt despairingly that she did not know what to say next. Perhaps the natural impulse that made her

lean back in her chair, and say quietly, 'Poor little Kitty!' was better than any acting to further her purpose.

Sir Eustace, who had risen, turned round with a softened expression on his face.

'Heaven forbid that what you have said should be true!' he said.

'But it is true, it is quite true, and—I hardly like to tell you, but her mother herself confessed it to me, poor child—poor little thing!'

'Do you blame me?'

Lady Bellingham paused a moment. She could not say that she blamed him; he would not believe it, his conscience being so perfectly clear.

'No, dear,' she said slowly, 'it is not your fault; it is her misfortune, poor little tender, gentle thing! There, go now, Eustace; do not let us talk any more about

it. The world is so made up of misfortunes and disappointments that one victim more or less cannot really signify.'

'I do not, and I cannot believe it!' he said so vehemently that his mother saw that his belief was wavering.

'Leave me now, Eustace,' she said; 'I feel so worn out that I shall not come down again.'

He left the room, leaving her with a tired sense that she had won some way on the path of her wishes.

CHAPTER X.

HIS fate seemed to Eustace Bellingham to be closing in more and more daily, like the famous Spanish torture. The idea that Kitty cared for him at first was perfectly intolerable; but as he became more accustomed to the notion, the first sense of shock passed away, and was succeeded by a most gentle, tender feeling towards her, half-compassion, half-gratitude.

The fact that he had heard (if fact it were) seemed to him a claim on all that was

best and most chivalrous in his nature. He thought over all the past year, the time that he had spent at the White House, all that he owed to both Kitty and her mother in the way of kindness and attention. There was something soothing in the very recollection of that quiet household; the thought of Kitty was to him less a reality than a personification of domestic calm.

Sir Eustace went into the drawing-room, where the whole party generally sat in the evening. It was almost dark, but in a large chair near the big terra-cotta stove he saw some one seated whom he took for his sister.

'Alice!' he exclaimed, going up to her.

The figure gave a little start.

'It is not Alice,' said Kitty's voice. 'It is only me.'

'But where is Alice? Has she left you alone?'

'Alice is gone upstairs to see Madame di St. Isidoro; she has been there for about half an hour.'

'Did she know that you were here?'

'Oh yes. I begged her not to wait for me.'

'And they have brought no lamps, or tea, or anything you want?'

'Oh, pray do not send for the lamps; I like it, indeed I like it!' exclaimed Kitty.

And something in the sound of her voice gave rise to a sudden suspicion in Eustace's mind that she had been crying.

He felt very tenderly towards her; his mother's words had taken deeper root than he had at all believed; he was astonished himself to perceive how sweet the thought was to him of being loved by any creature so gentle and humble.

'You are too young, and should be too happy, to care for the twilight,' he said

gently. 'It is only those who have sad memories who love the twilight, people whose sorrows have passed and turned into memories, not those who have living troubles and living joys.'

'I think one can hardly be too young to have sorrowful thoughts,' said Kitty.

'You ought not to have them.'

'I ought not to indulge them, at all events,' she said, sitting upright and trying to smile. 'Mamma would say it was nonsense.'

'Don't go,' he said, a sudden wish to try and put his mother's words to the proof coming over him irresistibly. 'Do you know, it makes me sad to hear that you are sad; you are so young, and should be so happy and bright. Tragedy should not touch the flowers; it is enough that it blasts the trees.'

'Tragedy is a large word,' she said. 'There are lesser words that fit me.'

'Poor little thing!' he said tenderly.

'Do not pity me,' said Kitty suddenly. 'I cannot bear it, that you, for whom I have felt such sympathy in your own great trial, should even think of my small troubles!'

At another time this allusion might have wounded or angered him; at this moment, in the quiet twilight, the sound of the level musical voice was wonderfully soothing, and melted him into a strange tenderness.

'Your sympathy is precious to me,' he said quietly.

'And some day—some day,' she said wistfully, 'will you not be comforted? Do you remember what Ursel said—"The grass grows over the graves"?'

'I comforted ?' he exclaimed, with a bitter laugh. 'It is not comfort I want. Who can build up shattered faith ?'

'God,' said Kitty reverently. 'Faith could not have been shattered unless it had been attached to an idol.'

'You are very wise, little Kitty !' he said, unconsciously using her pet name. 'You are a good and true woman. Going through the world trying to heal all wounded things, that is a very sweet and useful vocation in life.'

'I wish I could help you,' she said very earnestly.

Then he stopped himself suddenly. He had no right to speak to her like this—it was selfish, it might even (if his mother's words were true) be very cruel. He knew he had not done or said anything to win her heart before ; he must not begin now.

Two days afterwards he left Santa Chiara

and returned to England. Business called for his presence, and his leave was over. He was thankful to go, to get back into active life, and to endeavour to shake off the thoughts that pressed upon him like a nightmare. He was determined to shake them off. He was tired of suffering; it should be eradicated, or at all events trampled out of his life. Force and vigour seemed to follow the very determination.

Eustace reached London in the midst of a yellow fog. One of the clear sherry-coloured fogs, comparatively easy to go about the streets, but necessitating gas and lamps in the houses.

He drove straight to Eaton Square, to his sister's house, fancying that he was sure to find her at home on such a day. But he was mistaken, she had not come in, and he was received with rapture by little Muriel.

To be received by his small niece was just what suited him best—he could make her tell him all sorts of things that he would not have the courage to ask. He stood on the big bearskin rug warming himself, while she sat at his feet hugging her doll.

'You have been away years, and years, and years, Uncle Eu,' said Muriel solemnly. 'I don't know how I shall ever find time to tell you everything. Mamma is quite well, papa is quite well; Miss Lingard also is quite well, and she has two new teeth which grew in a night—beauties. You did not ask, but of course you want to know.'

'When will your mamma come home?'

'Oh, any moment; we shall have tea directly. Would you like a muffin for tea?'

'Very much; there are no muffins in Italy.'

'I went to see Uncle Austen's beast at the Zoo, yesterday, again—for the third time.'

'Has he a beast?'

'Yes, and it is placed under my special care. I always think of the old curmudgeon when I see it, because it was after seeing it I went and scolded him.'

'Who?'

'The venerable old person — Cousin Ralph.'

'Ah! how is he?'

'I heard Uncle Austen tell mamma, worse than ever.'

'Ah! and Marion?'

'I never see her now; she is always busy, and Cousin Ralph hates me. It is like a grown-up person to be hated, is it not?'

'Why does he hate you?'

'Because I heard Uncle Austen tell

mamma how unkind he was to May, and I told him so.'

'You are a brave little woman!'

'So papa said. I am glad you think so, too; but it will be all right soon.'

'How can it be all right?' said Eustace bitterly.

'Because Uncle Austen will take care of May. He always takes care of everyone; and besides—— But I must not say that.'

'Besides what, little woman?'

'Nursie said Uncle Austen was going to marry May; but mamma said it was gossip, and she does not wish me to grow up a gossiping old washerwoman; but I did not mind much, because papa promised me at once that I should have all his washing to do.'

'Is May well?'

'I suppose so. I heard papa say that he

thought she had quite got over it; so I thought she must have had the mumps like Ann the housemaid, or broken her leg like you. How is your poor, poor foot ?'

'Much better, dear. So papa thought she had got quite over it.'

'Aren't you glad, Uncle Eu ? You don't look quite glad; but if it were either mumps or a broken foot, it must have hurt very much.'

'I am very glad.'

'Then you ought to look glad. Your hair wants cutting, Uncle Eu.'

'You are quite right, Muriel. I did not like to trust it to an Italian barber.'

'You must have it done soon, Uncle Eu, or you won't be fit to be seen. There is mamma !'

Gerty flew into the room; she had heard of his arrival downstairs.

'My dear, dear, darling, precious old fellow! this is too good to be true. You stay here?'

'To-night, if you will have me; to-morrow I must go home, and join again on Thursday.'

'I am longing for news. In the first place, what about Georgie and Joe?'

'They are at Naples, going to make a little stay there before returning home.'

'And Alice says that Georgie has quite come to her senses.'

'Oh yes; she found out good little Joe's merits before the marriage.'

'I am so glad!' with a quick little sigh of relief.

'And the dear beloved Brown-Cliffords—do tell me all about them! I was so glad that they went out after all. How does the Begum get on in "foreign parts"?'

Gerty's voice and way of speaking dispersed the tragical element that had lately enveloped them all; and Eustace saw again his kind friend and nurse purring over him.

'She is all right,' he answered, smiling. 'But her life is a gigantic self-sacrifice—no cats, no comforts; and she hates art, architecture, and music, without which three amenities Santa Chiara is only a very dirty foreign town.'

'The sacrifice was too great! And my dear sweet little Kitty, with her lovely eyes, how about her?'

'I suppose she is all right.'

'Alice said she had not been well; but Alice's letters are most unsatisfactory. She never tells me any of the commonplace details in which my soul delights; but goes off into wild rhapsodies over this wonderful

Ursel, who seems to have turned all your heads.'

'He is wonderful,' said Eustace eagerly.

'So I imagined. Now, Eu, to business. Tom and I are going to the play to-night—will you come?'

'I should like it of all things—what play?'

'"Caste."'

'And how about the fog?'

'Oh, it is nothing—a very clear fog. It is rather becoming than otherwise. It makes one look like a Vandyke with several coats of deep yellow varnish, and the golden glow of antiquity enriching one's complexion. How is your foot?'

'I am a little lame still, but nothing to speak of; it is wonderfully better than it was.'

'I can't say much for your looks.'

'What is amiss?'

'Cadaverous—hollow-eyed.'

'What a flattering description!'

'If you don't fatten up soon, I shall prescribe all the new inventions. "Revalenta Arabica," "Koumiss"—every species of Brand. Oh, Muriel, Muriel! isn't it nice to have Uncle Eu back? Come, race me upstairs; I must put on my new gown.'

And away she ran, while Eustace proceeded to investigate into the whereabouts of his portmanteau.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS MATTY BROWN-CLIFFORD was terribly dull at the White House—so dull that it seemed to her as if the days would never come to an end. She used to go and see Gwendoline, coming in and sitting down without even the ceremony of 'Good-morning.'

It was this lack of ceremony that made such intercourse possible; for if Gwendoline were busy she never scrupled to say so, even if Miss Matty's quick tact had not instantly discovered it. Gwendoline had

become very fond of the funny, impulsive, quaint little woman, and she made a pleasant break in her monotonous and often suffering life.

'Only just in time to make up your fire, my dear,' Miss Matty observed one morning when she had, as she called it, 'popped in.' 'Is your papa out?'

'Papa is gone to a meeting at Raignton. Do you want him?'

'Not at all; I want you. Are you busy?'

'Not if you really want me. What I am doing can wait.'

'I don't often interrupt you, but I must do so to-day. I have had a letter from my sister which troubles me.'

'Nothing wrong at Santa Chiara, I hope?' Gwendoline asked quickly. She was easily startled.

'Nothing wrong with your people; I am not so happy about mine. But there, read it for yourself;' and she handed her an uncomfortable-looking letter on very thin foreign paper.

'What a number of women there are in the world!' exclaimed Miss Matty in a kind of soliloquy, quite aware that Gwendoline was not listening to her. 'It must be refreshing to get away to one's regiment sometimes; not but what women are excellent in their way, but their code of honour is defective. In a hand-to-hand scuffle they oppose, not three to one, but half a dozen to one. He has not a chance!'

'Who has not a chance?' said Gwendoline.

'I was indulging in an exceedingly bad habit—that of thinking aloud.'

'This letter does make one rather un-

happy,' said Gwendoline thoughtfully; and she slowly read it through again:

'My dear Matty,

'Bread and milk won't do; it never did agree with Margery Daw, so it is not unlikely to disagree with her daughter. Mince the fish very fine. They may have cream; but do, I entreat you, see that Burrows *does* mince the fish for Margery Daw. He was very careless about it once. I hope they have exercise enough. My only consolation in being away from them is that you are there; and besides the feeling of gratitude I have to you for your care of them, I feel that they are some compensation to you for our absence.'

'Ugh!' said Miss Matty; 'she may well talk of gratitude! She little knows how they make me creep. I can hardly sit in

the room with them sometimes. If they only had good, honest-sounding, heavy treads like decent animals, I should not mind so much.' She was reading over Gwendoline's shoulder.

'You ask me how our foreign expedition has turned out. Very badly—there; but what can you expect? I have had much experience, and the fruit of my experience is this—never follow anybody's advice except your own. Mr. St. Aubyn has been very mistaken.'

'Goodness me!' cried Miss Matty; 'I forgot that sentence altogether, or I never would have given you the letter.'

'Never mind,' said Gwendoline; 'it does not matter in the least.'

'You are sure you are not angry?' laying her hand anxiously upon her shoulder.

'Not at all, it never entered my head to mind. Let me go on.'

'The fact is, my dear Matty, we have bungled the whole thing; and I don't know what Mr. Brown-Clifford would have said if he could have known how badly we have managed. Other people manage troops of daughters; we have only one, and we have not managed her affairs satisfactorily. By-the-bye, while I think of it, don't let the kitten eat flies; they soon acquire the habit, and it is difficult to break them off afterwards. She is not handsome like her mother, so it is all the more important that she should be well trained. Kitty has been constantly with the Bellinghams. Eustace is neither bad-looking nor disagreeable; he is excessively handsome and has charming manners, a good heart and a great sorrow. Can you imagine a more attractive combina-

tion to a girl who has little beauty, no manner, a tender heart, and a soul overflowing with sympathy? Bear's-grease is better than macassar oil for their coats; but Burrows should use it sparingly. Tell him the best comes from Winter's, and he must be certain to get the blue pots with a bear printed on them; no other is genuine. And their coats are very important; every time they are washed it must be gently rubbed in. You must excuse my digressions. I write as the things I want to say come into my head. I suppose it will end in a marriage. I would not hear of it, or encourage it in any way, in spite of all the Bellingham woman says.'

'Oh, dear!' cried Miss Matty again, in an agony. 'I am too foolish, too careless. I ought not to have shown you the letter.'

Gwendoline smiled, and read on.

'If it were not that I think Kitty will never care for anybody else now—he has never paid her any attention. I feel that absolutely no blame can attach to him ; it is the result of circumstances, and my own utterly foolish disregard of precautions. He has gone back to England, and a good thing too ; it will give us time to breathe, for I sit and gasp sometimes for ten minutes at a time when I think of the muddle we have all got into. Margery Daw may have a little sulphur—not much—just from time to time. She takes it on a little bit of bacon nicely folded up. I say it will end in their marrying, for he is very fond of her in a sort of way ; and when Miss Austen is married it will settle his mind. But I don't know how it will all end, I am sure. All the adoration will be on her side ; if it is enough to keep her happy, I shan't mind.

It can't be helped now, and we must make the best of it.

'Your affectionate sister,

'MARY BROWN-CLIFFORD.'

'Poor little Kitty!' said Gwendoline sadly. 'One wishes it were different; they might be so very happy.'

Miss Matty shook her head. 'I do not see how they can ever be very happy,' she said, 'if they marry in this unsatisfactory way. However, it can't be helped; lots of people go comfortably through the world without ever having known the best.'

'Eustace is at Castleford; he came last night.'

'Is he? I should like to see him.'

'He is sure to go to the White House if he has time; he is very grateful to you for all you did for him.'

Miss Matty rose and shook her curls.

'I shall go back,' she said, 'and stay there all day, on the chance of his coming. Besides, I must write for the bear's-grease and the sulphur for those horrible animals.'

'Eustace does not share your horror of them.'

'No; he likes to have them on his shoulders, and round his neck, and pawing his face—pah! It will quite refresh them to see him.'

'And you really must go?'

'Yes; you had better tell your papa all the contents of that letter. It will be a lesson to him.'

'Poor papa!' said Gwendoline. 'No; I shan't torment him like that. You are very unkind to suggest it.'

'I should like—I should like——'

'Well, dear?'

'I should like to take the biggest of my sister's cats and fling it at somebody's head.'

'Not mine, I hope?'

'Not a real person, a metaphorical one; not to hurt them, but to relieve me.'

'And the cat?'

'Oh, the cat! I should not care if the cat did mind.'

'Well, I hope you will be in a more Christian frame of mind the next time I see you. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye.'

CHAPTER XII.

MISS MATTY'S words were half joking, but her feelings were very unhappy, and when she reached home she could settle to nothing. She tried one occupation after another, but did all so badly that she was forced to put them impatiently aside, and take up a book instead.

Her ears were continually on the alert, expecting Eustace to come; and as the hours went on, and morning and afternoon passed without any sign from him,

she became plaintive and almost disposed to be tearful.

She had her solitary tea brought to her by the solemn butler, who had lived long enough in the family to feel justified in making an occasional remark.

'I don't feel quite to say happy about Margery Daw, ma'am.'

'What!' exclaimed Miss Matty, really startled.

'Not her health, ma'am, but her disposition.'

'Oh, that is all!' said Miss Matty, relieved.

'She is discontented and peevish, and don't seem to care for anything.'

'Well, what can I do?'

'I think if you were to nurse her more, ma'am; she misses the ladies.'

'Here, give her to me!' cried Miss Matty

in a tone of resignation, and with an effort conquering her aversion, as Burrowes lifted the cat on to her knee.

He said afterwards:

'I made a pretence to persuade Miss Matty to nurse the cat; she looked so lonely, poor lady, and down-like, and I know our ladies always do find comfort in cats and such-like.'

It was good for Miss Matty's temper and highly to her credit that she did not pinch Margery Daw.

At half-past six, ten minutes after the post had gone out, Eustace Bellingham came in.

'How are you, Miss Matty?' he said heartily. 'I am off to London by the first train to-morrow, but I could not go without just looking in on you for a few minutes. Hulloa, pussies! come along.'

'Here, take them all—all, my dear.'

'It must be very dull for you here all alone, Miss Matty. Don't you miss them all dreadfully?'

'I have the cats.'

'True; but don't they keep you always in a condition of creep? I have not forgotten your feelings.'

'Never mind me. How did you leave my sister and Kitty?'

'Well. That is, Mrs. Clifford was very well; my mother did not think Miss Clifford looking well.'

'Why don't you stay a little longer?'

'My leave is up, and I want to make the most of my time now. I have sent in my papers.'

'What! leave the Guards?'

'Yes, even so. I can't afford it.'

'But you are not going to be idle, I

hope. I have a better opinion of you than that.'

'No, not idle; I shall be one of the unemployed at first, but I shall find work.'

'What kind?'

'Anything I can get—a secretaryship, perhaps; or something in the City, that would be best.'

Miss Matty looked thoughtful. 'I dare say you are right,' she said. 'But it seems a pity to give up your profession.'

Eustace smiled rather painfully. 'Necessity has no master,' he said.

'Why don't you marry my niece, and settle comfortably at Castleford?' said Miss Matty.

Her own words—spoken in so sudden an impulse that she said afterwards that it was something, not herself, that made use of her tongue—startled both her and her

hearer. The colour came and went in his face ; he looked up as if he hardly understood her.

'I beg your pardon,' she said hastily ; 'but I did not mean to say it—it came. But now it is out, I will go on. I have thought the matter over dispassionately, and the conclusion I have come to is, that there is nothing else to be done.'

'Miss Matty, you certainly do me too much honour,' he began stiffly, 'in supposing that such a thing should be possible.'

'My dear boy,' she said, 'perhaps the idea is more new to you than to me. Your mother has long wished it. Now don't look fierce, if you please.'

He could not help smiling, in spite of himself. She looked so funny leaning forward with her little wiry hands clasped, and her gray curls bobbing up and down.

'I wish you would,' she said plaintively. 'You have no idea what a child she is; she is so good, so sweet and gentle, and not at all the nonentity you all imagine her,' suddenly firing up. 'She is full of imagination, and strength, and courage. I never saw the girl yet who could equal her.'

'Anyone would be fortunate who was a friend of yours, Miss Matty,' said Eustace, smiling.

'Now don't talk commonplaces, but listen to me. Your sisters look upon her as a dear little ignoramus, to be petted; but as to moral courage, look how she volunteered to slay that bluebottle! I have plenty of courage, but I yield the palm to Kitty. She is very shy, but we have brought her up very badly, as anyone with half an eye could see. You must discriminate, and then you will see what is natural

and what is the fault of education. I don't mean to compare her to—to——'

'No, no; don't make comparisons!' cried Eustace hastily.

'I was not going to do so; didn't you hear me say I did not mean to compare? Then forgive me; my temper has got quite soured by solitude and those beasts of cats, and I am learning to scratch and spit like them.'

'You must be very lonely,' said Eustace, willing to change the conversation.

'Nobody ought to feel lonely. I should not, if I had the gift of holding my tongue, for I have plenty to occupy my thoughts; but I am always nearly bursting to express them.'

'That is a misfortune.'

'So you don't see your way to it?'

'To what?'

'To marrying Kitty.'

'My dear Miss Matty——'

But she stopped him, and putting her finger on his wrist, she began to speak. She put before him, in well-chosen spirited language, all the advantages that the scheme held. She drew a most fascinating picture of her niece, with so much heart and feeling that the tears rushed into her eyes. In the light in which she placed it, it seemed as if there were only one right course to take; that plain duty pointed it out, and that it would be cowardly not to yield.

When she had finished, the old inveterate habit of talking to herself came out, and leaning back in her chair, Eustace heard her say quite loud: 'Well done, Matty!'

He could not help it, the circumstance struck him with its ludicrous side, and he burst out laughing.

Miss Matty looked at him at first with unfeigned amazement, not quite certain whether she ought to be offended or not; the struggle in her face was so evident that Eustace's laughter almost overpowered him, and Miss Matty was obliged to give it up and laugh also.

'I don't see what there is to laugh at,' she said suddenly, pulling herself up. 'It is a very serious matter.'

'So serious that we won't say any more about it, Aunt Matty,' said Eustace; and though he spoke playfully, something in the tone of his voice made her see that it would not do to pursue the subject further.

He got up to go presently, and she parted with him rather wistfully.

'You are not angry with me?' she said, and she looked so small and woe-begone that he was quite touched.

'Angry! How could I ever be angry with you?' he said very kindly. 'No, no; you may say anything and everything you like to me, anywhere and everywhere.'

'Done!' she exclaimed joyfully.

'Good-bye, dear Miss Matty!' and he was gone.

Miss Matty looked after him for a moment, and then turned indoors.

'He hasn't a chance, poor boy!' she said.

Then her sentimental mood was dispersed by a qualm of terror. Margery Daw had bolted a piece of sugar which had been overlooked on the hearth-rug, and was in all the horrors of a long-sustained and perfectly silent choke. A shriek — violent ringing for professional assistance.

Dinner-time found Miss Matty prostrate after so many and conflicting emotions, without courage, and without appetite.

CHAPTER XIII.

EUSTACE lay awake all that night thinking, and when he went up to London the next day his mind was still in a whirl of doubt and perplexity. The constant dropping of water will wear away a very stone; and the constant reiteration of one idea will have much the same effect on the human mind.

He began to get used to the idea of marrying Kitty, began to fancy her at Castleford, and to see visions and make plans with a view to that possibility. He dreaded the loss of his profession much; but as

matters stood now there was no alternative. He could not rest, and at last one day he resolved to make up his mind one way or another before night.

He went up to London from Windsor where he still was, and drove to Gerty's house. She was just going out, but he stopped her actually in the hall, and instead of going upstairs drew her into the dining-room.

'Gerty,' he said hoarsely, 'tell me the honest truth. I must know it. Is May going to marry your brother-in-law or not?'

'I can't tell you, Eustace,' said Gerty, in real distress. 'I cannot tell you, because I don't know.'

'You would not deceive me, Gerty, would you?'

'Indeed—indeed, darling, I would not!

I can only repeat the same thing. I don't know. He cares for her as much—as much as you do!'

Eustace made an impatient gesture.

'And some day, I cannot help thinking——'

'I see,' he said bitterly, 'you are only trying to soften it off. Well, I have no doubt that it is the best possible thing that can happen under the circumstances.'

Gerty did not answer.

'Don't let me keep you,' he said, 'as you are going out.'

She nodded. She had an engagement that could not be put off, but she was very unwilling to leave him.

He went upstairs and found Muriel, broke all the laws of the Medes and Persians by taking her away from her governess, and brought her downstairs.

'Come, my little washerwoman,' he said; 'I want you to gossip, if you please.'

'But mamma said not.'

'Never mind mamma for once. When mamma was a little girl she had to do as I told her.'

'Not really?'

'Yes, really. Have you seen the curmudgeon lately?'

'Yes; he and May came here yesterday.'

'Was anybody else here?'

'No; only Uncle Austen. They stayed a very long time, and May sang!'

'What did she sing?'

'Oh, some language nobody could understand. The curmudgeon did not like it, and said her voice was weak; but it wasn't —it roared through the whole room.'

Eustace laughed at the unpoetical description.

'Will you tell your mamma,' he said, 'that I am going to Santa Chiara almost immediately?'

'Oh dear! and I thought you would stay always, now.'

'No; tell her that, and that she shall soon know the reason why. Would you like to come out with me now?'

'Yes, if you will take me to see Uncle Austen's beast.'

'No, Muriel; we will see the Japanese Village instead. I can't tell you why, but I perfectly hate that beast.'

'Hate that darling, darling beast! Oh, you are not good—to hate is very wicked!'

'Should you not like the Japanese Village? There are dear little Japanese babies with little slits for eyes, running up sideways in their heads, and the dearest little pigtails in the world.'

'I will put on my hat,' said Muriel.

That evening Muriel told her mamma first of all the message her uncle had sent, and then the other speech he had made.

'If Uncle Eu lives to be old, he will never be a venerable old gentleman,' she said. 'He is far more likely to be an unvenerable old ruffian if he hates innocent beasts like Uncle Austen's!'

Eustace Bellingham's resignation was accepted, not without many remonstrances, and he found himself, for the first time in his life, an idle man. The blank of the few days that followed was very hard to bear. Everything in the world that he cared for seemed to be slipping from him. He put Castleford into the hands of the letting agents; he sold his horses; and then the weary blank question offered itself to his

mind, Where should he go?—what should he do next?

Although he had sent that message to his sister through Muriel, he had by no means made up his mind. The alternative of going back to Santa Chiara and offering himself to Kitty was still an alternative, though every day seemed to make it more likely that so it would end.

At last he started, acting on a sort of impulse almost as suddenly as if it had not been before his mind for weeks; and in a few days he found himself once more in the picturesque Italian town.

It was spring now, a glorious spring—the sky that exquisite blue that we rarely see in England before midsummer; and all the country was brilliant with scarlet and purple anemones and exquisite little

yellow and crimson and white striped Damigella tulips.

Instead of going to Palazzo St. Isidoro, an impulse led Eustace to seek out Ursel first.

He found the house with the painted loggia full of people. Assunta was entertaining her friends. They were seated in gay groups round the little iron tables, drinking coffee and making a noise such as three times the same number of English could hardly have equalled.

Eustace did not go in. He was moving away when a hand was laid on his shoulder, and turning round, he saw Ursel looking at him with a beaming look of welcome and affection.

'You have come back!' he exclaimed. 'I am indeed rejoiced; and to stay, is it not so? Come with me down into the

olive-yards ; there will be peace there. My house is swarming like a hive.'

He took Eustace's arm, and they wandered off the road down grass-paths, between the young spring-corn and twisted olive-trees.

'My friend, my friend!' he exclaimed, 'I am glad to see you. I thought you had gone away—away into the big ocean of work and unrest, and that, unless I followed you thither, I should perhaps never see you again.'

'No, no! you see, that same ocean of which you speak has cast me ashore as mere driftwood.'

'Patience! the diftwood has also its work to do. Not that I acknowledge the comparison, my friend. No, no! how have you fared?'

'I have given up my profession.'

'That is bad; it is a misfortune to restless beings like yourself to have no career. You must make a new one.'

'That is not so easy.'

'No; food is tasteless and distasteful without salt, and life without interests is to be without salt. You must do something.'

'Perhaps I may marry.'

'That would not be a bad idea. The experiment is worth trying.'

'But experiments sometimes fail.'

Ursel laughed lightly.

'Against such failure you and your friends should guard by common-sense in the selection. I need not mention more than a few points. She must be pretty, of your own world, not unintelligent, amiable, not clever, and with a reasonable dower.'

'You would allow your friends some choice in the matter?'

'Assuredly; does not your future affect them almost as much as yourself? and with your interest at heart their judgment will be calm-judging and wise.'

'I believe you are right, Ursel,' said Eustace, looking at Ursel's earnest face.

They talked on about one subject after another, sitting on a fallen tree in the sunny olive-yards. The air was full of sweet odours; the larks were singing passionately overhead, bright-eyed lizards glided across the grass at their feet.

Eustace felt soothed and calmed. As he rose to take leave and go homewards, he passed Ursel's house just as a ringing laugh burst out, and he recognised the shrill joyousness of his friend's young wife.

He thought as he turned into the hot road glaring with white dust:

'It is curious; one imagines that all men

go through the same experience, but how different it is! Ursel, in his unreal world of art, goes through experiences which even my imagination fails to understand ; but of love he knows nothing—it is a sealed book to him.'

CHAPTER XIV.

EVERYONE was out when Eustace reached the Palazzo St. Isidoro. He had not told them he was coming, and did not expect to find them. He ordered his room, and went upstairs to the salons.

The rooms were full of flowers. Alice used to bring them in almost in armfuls; she revelled in their beauty and quantity. On a marble table near the window stood a majolica vase filled with exquisite white irises.

Eustace was bending down over them admiring them, when he heard voices outside; a young, fresh, clear voice speaking in very pure Italian to the servant.

'I will go in, Mario,' it said, 'and write a few lines to your signorina, which please give her at once when she comes in.'

Then the door opened, and in came Kitty Clifford. She did not see that anyone was in the room, but came in holding up the white tunic of her gown which was quite filled with flowers. Her gown was pure white, but she had a pale pink silk handkerchief knotted round her throat, and the gentle wind had been playing through her hair and ruffled its smoothness into little golden ripples.

Eustace had never thought her pretty before, but at that moment she seemed to him as sweet, and fair, and lovely as a child.

He advanced to meet her. She was so startled when she saw him that she let the whole mass of flowers fall to the ground, and ran forward with both hands outstretched.

'You have come back! You have come back!' she cried childishly.

The floor was covered with iris and tulips and flowering burberis, and other lovely flowers.

'Did I startle you? I am so sorry,' he exclaimed eagerly, as Kitty suddenly drew away her hands, blushing crimson, with the old painful rush of self-consciousness and horror at herself for having met him so warmly.

But it was the first impulse that dwelt in his mind, the eager movement, the sudden shining of the blue eyes, the unmistakable rapture of her welcome.

She knelt down to cover her confusion, to gather up the fallen treasures, and he stood watching her with strangely conflicting feelings. That welcome had given him a quick feeling of possible happiness that might even yet come to him; but it was transient.

Then a sudden strong temptation came over him to accept this little gentle heart that was almost offered to him; to find a substitute for the old passionate love of his life in this calm affection; to let her soothe and comfort him; to accept all, reconciling it to his conscience that her eyes were not closed to the truth that he had nothing to give her in exchange.

'Little Kitty,' he said suddenly, 'by many kind words just now and then you have led me to suppose that you knew my history. Am I not right?'

Kitty was still kneeling on one knee, gathering up the flowers. She looked suddenly up at him, with her cheeks still rosy and a startled look in her eyes. She was too frightened to do more than give a little nod of acquiescence.

As he looked down upon her very tenderly, very kindly, it was more like the warm affection of an elder brother to his little sister, than like that of a man pleading his suit. It reassured her; she still looked up into his face.

'In so speaking, Kitty,' he went on, 'I have perhaps fancied—but I may be wrong—that you did care for me a little—even a very little?'

Kitty rose to her feet trembling from head to foot, with her hands clasped together. He went on, speaking rather hoarsely now:

'You know, child, that I have not that

first best love to offer you. I do not know what has become of my love. It has left Marion, who was not true to me, and I think it died then; so that I sometimes seem to myself to have grown cold and hard and bitter.'

'Oh, no, no!' she exclaimed.

He put out his hands and took both of hers.

'Am I too madly selfish, Kitty?' he said earnestly, 'to think that you might comfort me?'

She only trembled more and more.

'Kitty, dear little thing,' he said, 'only answer me this. Is it true that I have had the privilege of winning your love? Tell me, Kitty.'

But she could not speak.

'If that is so—I do not know—it may not be so very selfish of me after all. I

cannot tell. Little Kitty, won't you tell me?'

She gave a little sigh that was almost a sob, and she pressed his hands to her heart.

'If I might—might try to comfort you,' she faltered so low, that he had to bend far down to hear.

Then Eustace knew that his mother was right, that what she had told him was quite true, and he stooped down and gravely kissed the brow of his young betrothed.

'I will try and make you happy, dear,' he said.

She looked up at him with eyes shining radiantly through a mist of tears, but no words would come.

Presently Alice came in running joyously; she had been told downstairs of her brother's arrival.

'Oh, Eustace! fancy your taking us by

surprise in this manner! It is too, too delightful. And how did you leave Gerty and Tom? and did you miss Georgie? Gwendoline wrote that she had not seen you again. Dear me! what an avalanche of questions you will have to answer. But what is it, darling? Have you a headache? you look so dreadfully white.'

'No; I have no headache. I am all right. See, Miss Brown-Clifford wants to go.'

Kitty had begun to put on her gloves and refasten her handkerchief.

'This untidiness is entirely unlike you, Kitty,' said Alice gaily, beginning to pick up the flowers; but her gaiety vanished when she perceived that though Kitty tried to answer lightly, and as if at her ease, she could not do it — that her colour was coming and going in an unusual manner, and that she was putting the flowers to-

gether without any consideration for their looks.

'I will do it; do not trouble yourself, Kitty,' she said a little abruptly; a very cold dread beginning to steal over her.

Kitty said good-bye, and Eustace took her to the door and sent for the maid, who was waiting to take her home.

When he came back into the drawing-room, Alice was standing just as he had left her, waiting for him with a look of keen anxiety and perplexity on her face.

He threw himself into a chair, and took up a book. For a moment she did not speak—a sort of instinct that her best policy would be to be silent now, to wait for a moment in which she could better command her voice and the thrilling excitement within her. But it was too strong, she could not resist it; and she came swiftly up to

her brother, and put her hand on his shoulder.

'Eustace!' she exclaimed. 'Oh, what does it mean? What is this change that has come over you both?'

'Can you not guess?' he answered. 'I should have thought that to you, at all events, it would have been obvious!'

'You have done it! You have asked her to marry you?'

'Yes.'

Alice uttered a little faint cry. 'Oh, Eustace, my darling, my darling! what have you done?'

'Let me alone!' he cried almost roughly. But that day and for many following days, when on every side congratulations were pouring in, his sister's words pursued him relentlessly, 'What have you done? what have you done?'

CHAPTER XV.

ABOUT two years had passed after the marriage of Sir Eustace Bellingham to Kitty Brown-Clifford, and for the first time a general gathering of the whole family was to take place at Castleford.

These general gatherings are more often full of pain than pleasure. It is strange how tenaciously the human mind clings to tradition, and even improvements seem uncalled-for innovations, and the disappearance of old discomforts causes the

pang of regret which every right-minded individual must give to the vanished grievance.

Gerty Austen was feeling this as she crossed the Rectory lawn, and came into Gwendoline's room. It was wonderful weather, a burst of summer while as yet it was almost spring—the beginning of June. Summer had begun with real heat.

Some things, happily for us, do never change. To some hearths we may come back year after year, time after time, in our constantly varying earthly pilgrimage, and feel a restful certainty that we shall find the sofa in the same place, the arm-chair, the little table, the same old ornaments, all the objects we have known and loved so long, and the same sweet human presence, unchanging year after year;

time so imperceptibly silvering the hair, and touching the life with gentle, loving hand.

To such a home Gerty came—busy, merry Gerty, living always in the full whirl of life, very gay, very bright, very useful.

'To come to you is like stepping out of the blazing sun into the most delicious, cool, sweet shade,' she said, sitting down on a stool by her cousin's sofa, and taking her hand in hers.

'An excellent thing to-day, my dear. Did you ever know such heat at this time of year?'

'It is pleasant to be out of town; and I am glad to bring Muriel away. She was getting quite pale, and is growing fast.'

'She is very pretty, Gerty.'

'Yes, is not she? I get a great many

compliments about her. I hope she won't get spoilt. But Tom does so adore her, and Austen spoils her also.'

'You look tired, Gerty.'

'I am not exactly tired,' answered Mrs. Austen, with hesitation.

'Ah! it is the first time you have been back under the new *régime*.'

'Yes. You see, what with our being abroad so long with Tom's regiment, and Muriel's lessons, and other hindrances, we have never managed it; and I have come to you to be comforted.' And light-hearted Gerty quickly dashed away two tears.

'What is it particularly?' said Gwendoline anxiously. 'I have grown so used to it all that perhaps I do not see so plainly as you do.'

'Kitty's face haunts me; and how pretty she has become!'

'She is lovely sometimes. I always told you she would be.'

'She is not happy.'

'It will mend in time. Have patience.'

'It is getting worse.'

'No, no; why should you say that?'

'Because I can see it. Look at the little strained nervous movements she makes; look how she watches Eustace, and starts and listens for his step whenever he is out of the room; and, Gwendoline dear, it bores him.'

Gwendoline nodded sadly.

'As for Alice,' Gerty went on, 'I don't know what has come over her. She is unjust to Kitty; she tries to conceal it, but I can see how she still resents it all.'

'I know. I have talked to her, but it is of no use. She has taken it into her

head that the marriage was owing to us in a great measure ; and she says she has tried, but she cannot get on with Kitty.'

'Eustace is most kind to her. Look at all he has done for her ! How beautiful he has made the house ! what pains he takes with her garden, with her rooms ! If Kitty were a commonplace character, she would be perfectly satisfied. He is always getting jewels for her, and different gifts. I think he does his utmost.'

'Patience,' said Gwendoline ; 'it may yet come right. Eustace is not himself yet. He is still bitter and cynical. I think, Gerty, the best thing that you could do would be to try and make them all merry again ; to get them out of the dull, hard, commonplace life they are leading, and make them laugh. Tragedy hates an honest laugh. You will be doing a

good deed. And above all, above everything, dear Gerty, don't let Kitty put her troubles into words.'

'No? I was really going to ask you whether you could not persuade her to confide in you, and give her some good advice.'

'Not for worlds!' exclaimed Gwendoline. 'I cannot imagine a greater misfortune. Any other trouble in the world but this one might be helped by confidence. But to put this into words would be to make dry bones live.'

'So your remedy is laughter.'

'Yes,' said Gwendoline decidedly. 'Make them think more of outward things, and be merry and young again, and not live upon their feelings.'

'Kitty has no fun in her.'

'There you are wrong. I have known

her say the funniest, quaintest things. She would have plenty of fun if she were happy. Alice ought to be made to laugh.'

'In fact, you look to me to get them all out of their groove.'

'You don't know how I have looked forward to your coming. I even devoutly hoped that the Shetlands would run away with you again.'

'No; the Shetlands have grown old and sober. Old they always were—eighteen and twenty, Georgie says; but they were wild enough for tiny colts. Now that is all over.'

'And time it should be with such venerable personages. Now do as I want you, Gerty; bring a blast of fresh air from the busy outer world, and stir up our stagnant little Castleford pool.'

'Mrs. Brown-Clifford is coming to-day.'

'I am very glad. Kitty has seen nothing of her. But how will your mother get on with her?'

'We shall see,' said Gerty, laughing. 'Tom says that Muriel will have an opportunity of studying life. I don't think it is very good for her.'

'Send her to me when you want to get rid of her,' said Gwendoline. 'I delight in having her, as you know.'

'Thank you, dear; I will. I should like this precious room to be the haven of rest and comfort to her that it always has been to me. What a wonderful resuscitation of the old red tablecloth!'

'Ah! you were deceived! How pleased Eustace would be! the trouble he took to match it exactly, you would not

believe. It was almost a superstitious fancy that it must be a facsimile, and he sent all over England after it.'

'What killed the old one?'

'It died a natural death of venerable old age, and I got a nice new brown one with a fringe, which offended all the family, and caused the fuss.'

When Gerty went away, her heart was lighter than it had been before her visit. She thought Gwendoline's advice good, and she tried to persuade herself that it contained a panacea for all the family troubles.

The weather was so hot that no one could rest indoors, and occupations of all sorts were taken out to the comfortable lounging-chairs under great elm-trees, or the cool white and scarlet striped tents overlooking the lawn-tennis ground.

The aspect of the place had changed; it

looked prosperous and well cared-for ; the order was perfect, the gardens laid out with great skill and beauty. All through the village, and throughout Castleford, the same thoughtful care showed itself, in the rebuilding of cottages, agricultural improvements, and new schools, and most careful and beautiful restoration of the fine old church.

Eustace certainly did his duty as a landlord. The house itself was so completely refurnished and transformed, that Eustace was obliged to search the lumber-rooms for old-forgotten chairs or tables when he wanted them. Even then the search was often useless, for vanished things have a strange knack of disappearing, withdrawing their unappreciated existences from the scene of their former triumphs.

Some such search had been going on

all the morning. Eustace, hot, flushed, and impatient, came into the tent in which reposed in calm coolness his mother, his wife, and both his sisters.

'I can't find it, Alice,' he said. 'It is the strangest thing. A big bureau like that does not vanish into thin air; but with all this topsy-turvying of all the traditions of one's childhood one never can lay one's hands on anything.'

Kitty looked up with a quick, wistful look. The transformation was not her doing. Eustace had seemed to make it his chief amusement, and to take more interest in renovating the old home than in anything else. She fancied so, at all events; but an odd feeling was present with her that when anything was missing it was her fault, and that they all thought so.

'Have you tried the big cupboard under the back-stairs, Eustace?' she said.

'Yes; but there is no getting into it: it is all choked up with huge trunks.'

'I will have them moved.'

'Shall I go and have it done?' said Alice, springing up. 'Come, Eu.'

'Too much trouble,' he answered, flinging himself full-length on the grass. 'After all, if one does find the old thing, it won't be of much use.'

'It was so worm-eaten,' said Kitty.

'It is old Chippendale,' said Alice. 'And after all, its value to us was not its merits, but its associations. If you can find it, Eustace, you will let me have it?'

'Of course. Anything in the drawers?'

'A quantity of letters.'

'No,' said Kitty quietly. 'I took all the letters out.'

'You took them out!' exclaimed Alice, almost indignantly. 'Did you know what they were?'

'I knew Miss Austen's handwriting,' answered Kitty. 'I thought they should not be left in an open bureau. I placed them in a safe place.'

'You did not read them?'

Kitty mastered the indignation which brought the colour flushing into her cheeks, and answered simply, 'They were not addressed to me.'

'Thank you for taking care of them, Kitty,' said Eustace. 'You see, Alice, your treasures were safer than you deserved.'

'I would rather have had them restored to me at once,' said Alice.

'I am sorry; but I put them in a despatch-box, and quite forgot them,' said

Kitty. 'Shall I go and fetch them for you now?'

'It is too hot,' said Lady Bellingham. 'Besides, your mother will arrive in ten minutes, Kitty; you cannot go till she has come.'

'Very well.'

Kitty leant back in her chair and resumed the knitting that was never out of her hands. It was a habit that peculiarly irritated her husband. It was like her mother; it made him fancy that she would grow into the counterpart of that excellent lady. Kitty sometimes perceived this irritation. Sometimes she would very gladly have given it up, but she could not do without it; it was the one relief to the constant feeling of nerve-strain in which she passed her life. She had altered a good deal; immensely improved in looks

by the new perfection of her dress, carefully studied by a clever maid, who knew the colours that improved her pure white colouring and blue eyes, and the *coiffure* that suited her soft hair. Strangers always thought the delicate oval face and slender figure, which moved with a kind of simple dignity, exceedingly attractive at first sight; but poor little Kitty had been trained too long in timidity and self-consciousness. She had nothing to say for herself; her conversation was limited to gentle acquiescence with all that was said. If she had opinions, they were never advanced. Kitty resembled one of those white delicate Devoniensis buds which come out too soon, and for lack of the rich summer sun never unfold their petals.

And from whence was the sun to come

that would ripen Kitty? The reflection of it had passed over her. For a short time a glorious dream of what that sunshine might be, that great sacred, holy love, protecting, comforting, and sufficing, that encircles the happy wife, had appeared to her, a glimpse so bright that it seemed to her that it would have been better not to have known it, even in a dream, if it were not for her.

Her husband was very kind to her, but slowly it dawned upon her that she was failing in the task he had assigned her—she could not make him happy. The very consciousness of her own failure froze up her powers, made her diffident and shy; and as the long days passed on, and each weary evening dragged out its slow length, her keen eyes saw the fatal expression on her husband's face of deadly *ennui*.

She could see his hardly-repressed yawns, would mark the toneless sound of his voice and step ; and when she found herself alone she would ask God passionately on her knees to let her die—only to let her die and set him free again.

It was far worse for her than for Eustace. He had expected so little that he was not disappointed ; but she had fondly hoped that her very love would make up to him for all else.

After a time Kitty tried a new resource : she filled the house with his friends ; she persuaded his mother and sisters to come often and stay long. Alice in especial she entreated to stay with them ; and yet Alice was not kind to her. She did not understand her ; she had no idea that beneath that exterior of gentle, wistful dignity lay hidden such passionate suffer-

ing. She could not forgive the marriage, or reconcile herself to it; she made no effort to love her sister-in-law.

Kitty, in her self-abasement, never even wondered at it; it seemed natural to her that his sister should resent her brother's want of happiness, which she fancied was as apparent to the outer world as it was to herself.

They were still sitting in the tent when Mr. Mulroy came eagerly in.

'Kitty, Kitty!' he exclaimed; 'your mother's carriage is in sight!'

'Do pull down the curtain, Joe,' said Georgie, looking up from her novel; 'the light is so strong.'

'Will you not come to the door, Kitty?' said Mr. Mulroy, obeying his wife. 'It will do her very heart good to see you waiting for her there.'

Kitty looked up with a grateful smile, and rose.

'How near is the carriage?' said Eustace lazily.

'Turning up the avenue.'

'Then I will allow myself another three minutes, and follow you.'

Kitty did not wait; she left the tent and went towards the house. Her step, eager at first, slackened; she was very pale.

'How long is it since you last saw your mother?' said Mr. Mulroy very kindly.

'It is nearly a year. She seemed to take such a fancy to Richmond that I could not get her to move.'

'And you have not been to see her?'

Kitty looked up at the kind face beside her. 'Mamma has strange ideas,' she

said. 'She thought young couples should learn to do without their parents. She would not have me;' and Kitty laughed.

'There is a foundation of great wisdom in that,' said Joe Mulroy.

'And I suppose mothers are supposed to be fanciful,' said Kitty. 'It seemed a long time to me.'

'It must have been interminable to her.'

His words went to her heart with a warm glow of gratitude. They stood on the hall-door steps now, and the carriage was close by. Kitty held out her arms with a little cry as it drove up.

There was the placid puss-like face, animated to a degree she had never seen before. In a moment she was in the hall with Kitty clinging round her neck, gasping, almost sobbing with delight.

'Hoity toity!' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford, sinking into a chair, and surveying her daughter; but Kitty threw her arms round her again, and devoured her with kisses.

'Oh, mamma! dear mamma! to have you again! It is too delightful!'

But Mrs. Brown-Clifford was a shrewd woman; she knew that she had never inspired so much love in her daughter's breast. So at first it astonished her, and then sent a thrill of painful suspicion through her mind.

'Hoity toity!' she said first, and then: 'And now, my dear, let me arrange my bonnet; I cannot present myself before the assembled family with a bird of paradise over my right ear.'

'It is not a bird of paradise, it is a paroquet,' said Kitty almost hysterically.

'Mr. Mulroy,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford, 'will you do me the favour of lifting that basket on to the chair? It contains my cat. And will you keep an eye on it? It is a large soft cat; if anyone sits down on it, it will go flat at once. Yes, Kitty, a paroquet; you are quite right.'

'There is Eustace!' exclaimed Kitty, as her husband came quickly in.

'I was too late after all!' he exclaimed. 'I hoped to have been at the door to welcome you. I hope you are well, and not overtired by your journey.'

'I am perfectly well, except that I have a cold, and asthma, and a bad headache, and am blind and deaf, and dirty and overtired by the hottest journey I ever took in my life.'

'What would you like to do? Will you go to your room with Kitty, and rest

there until tea-time, or come out at once ?'

'Which way does my room face ?' was the answer.

'North,' said Kitty quickly. 'I chose it on purpose.'

'Then I will go there. I am much obliged to you, Sir Eustace.'

'Dear old soul !' exclaimed Eustace, when the ladies had gone upstairs, and he and his brother-in-law were returning to the tent. 'I am very glad to see her puss-like face again.'

'I think there are many worse people in the world than Mrs. Brown-Clifford,' answered Mr. Mulroy.

'Cats and all.'

'Well, Bellingham, I think you have much to be thankful for ; look at her tact in leaving her comfortable home because

she thought it best not to live too near her daughter, and setting up in Hampstead, or Sheen, or somewhere.'

'In Richmond. Well, I am duly grateful. It was well done.'

'Has Mrs. Brown-Clifford come?' said Lady Bellingham, raising her head as they entered the tent together.

'Yes, as large as life, and twice as hot,' said Eustace. 'Kitty has taken her up to her room.'

'I am glad she has her mother,' said Joseph Mulroy cordially.

'I don't suppose anyone could care very much for such a mother,' said Alice.

'You would not say so if you had seen her face, and her delight at meeting her just now.'

'One's mother is one's mother all the world over,' said Georgie abruptly.

'Eustace!' exclaimed Alice, 'will you come in now and get Kitty to give me those letters?'

'It is a shame to disturb them,' said Eustace lazily.

'Oh, Kitty never minds that sort of thing; and I want them so much. Tell me which room you have given Mrs. Brown-Clifford, and I will go there.'

'The north blue-room. Are you going?'

'Yes.'

Alice walked away, half expecting her brother to follow; but he did not do so.

She crossed the lawn; the sun was just sinking; it shone on a level with her eyes under her hat in a disagreeable way. She was glad to get indoors, though the house itself was very hot.

What Eustace had said carried a little

weight with Alice. She did not go upstairs at once ; she took up a book and sat down and read for half an hour. Then she threw it down, for it did not interest her ; and murmuring to herself that they must have got over their first effusions by this time, she went upstairs to Mrs. Brown-Clifford's room. Arrived at the door, she knocked twice, but received no answer ; so she pushed it open and went in.

The sight which met her eyes made her hesitate, and for a moment meditate flight. By the open window, in a large armchair, with her cat on her knee, sat Mrs. Brown-Clifford ; while on a stool at her feet, with her face buried in her lap against the cat's white fur, sat Kitty, her whole slender frame shaking with uncontrollable sobs. But even in her startled

haste Alice had not time to withdraw ; Kitty sprang to her feet.

'What is it?' she asked, making a violent effort to overcome her emotion.

'I beg your pardon,' said Alice. 'I did not mean to interrupt you ; but you did not hear my knock, and——'

'Did you knock?' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford.

'Yes, several times. Never mind, Kitty ; it is nothing. I do not want anything.'

'What was it, dear? Oh, I know—those letters. If you will come to the boudoir.'

She had dashed away her tears, and was striving hard to stop the throbbing of her throat.

'Dear Kitty, please do not trouble

about it,' said Alice kindly; but Kitty only slipped her hand through her arm.

'Let me,' she said.

They reached the boudoir. The outside shutters were closed. The room was full of hothouse flowers; it was pleasantly cool, but a fragrance pervaded it which made Alice exclaim:

'My dear Kitty, you don't mean to say that you let Eustace smoke here!'

'I am only too glad when he will,' answered Kitty, with a mournful little smile. 'The smoking-room is such a long way off, and he does not like me to visit him out there.'

She found a key, opened a despatch-box which stood in a corner of the room, and handed out to Alice two bundles of letters. Alice looked at her in astonish-

ment ; one of the packets was directed to her, the other to Eustace.

'You wish me to take both ?' she said quickly.

'If you like.'

'Did you see that these belong to Eustace ?'

'Yes ; never mind. Give them to him if you like,' said Kitty, with no other sign of feeling than a quiver of the lips.

'No, no, dear ; keep them.'

Kitty took them quietly and replaced them.

'They might make him unhappy,' she said.

'Oh no, not now !' exclaimed Alice ; but the sound of her voice had no true conviction in it, and Kitty only gave a little patient sigh.

'Alice dear,' she half whispered, as they

prepared to go, 'please do not tell Eustace that you found me crying so foolishly.'

'Why, Kitty?'

'No, no; don't tell him!' she repeated vehemently. 'Promise me you won't!'

Alice bent down and kissed her.

'Very well,' she said.

CHAPTER XVI.

'IT is fun to see my mother and my highly-respected mother-in-law together,' said Eustace to Joseph Mulroy a few days later, as they walked about the garden after dinner. 'My mother has never found her match yet; and the funny thing is that she tries to look upon Mrs. Clifford as a nonentity, and understands her as little as a dog or cat who pats an electric battery with a patronizing paw.'

'Your wife does not look well,' said

Joe seriously. 'Georgie does not think so either.'

'This tremendously hot spring makes us all languid,' said Eustace, with a yawn. 'Have you any plans for the autumn?'

'We shall go down to Cowes when the House is up; it will be good for the baby. And Georgie fancies trying the yacht herself this year.'

'By-the-bye, that juvenile; I neglected my duties in not inquiring about it. Is it all right?'

'Yes, thank you,' answered Joseph Mulroy.

'Well, I thought you would answer by a dissertation on its charms, and the extraordinary likeness it was developing to some one or other among us.'

'I will leave that to Georgie,' he answered, smiling.

'To Georgie? Then I think the poor little chap will not have its due from either of you. Georgie always professed to hate babies.'

'She likes them better when they be come more companionable,' said Joe hopefully.

'Will it yacht with you?'

'No, no; that would never do. I wish you and Kitty would come down and go with us, Eustace; it would be very jolly.'

'Thanks, I should like it; but Kitty is a bad sailor, and I think of going to Norway for some fishing.'

'By yourself?'

'With Kinloch and one or two other men. One wants to run away from one's domestic fireside sometimes, you know.'

'It was a pity you gave up the Guards.'

'Well, don't talk of it. One is a fool sometimes, and one must reap the consequences.'

'You have plenty to do here?'

'Oh yes, as far as that goes, but to an idle man time passes heavily.'

Joe Mulroy sighed.

'Why not go into Parliament?' he said. 'I have been so glad that Georgie made me stand.'

'I should be bored to death by seven or eight months of the year in London. We have done the season regularly since I married, and have been thankful to get it over at Ascot.'

'Does your wife like gaiety?'

'I should not think so; she creeps about the crowded rooms looking terrified to death, and hardly speaking above a frightened whisper. It can't be much

enjoyment, but she does her duty nobly, poor child!'

'She will gain self-confidence in time. Her shyness is very pretty and engaging.'

Eustace made no answer.

Under the elm-trees Mrs. Brown-Clifford had seated herself in the largest chair she could find, and was knitting. Kitty, looking girlishly young and pretty, had persuaded Alice to come into the boat. Georgie and Lady Bellingham entertained their guest.

'I hope you like Richmond, Mrs. Brown-Clifford.'

'Pretty well. It is too near London for peace, and too far for comfort; the countrified aspect is cockney, and the London aspect is vulgar; my rooms smoke, and the river smells abominably. I like the place.'

'With such drawbacks you must be easy to please.'

'I dare say. My sister hates it; she would like to come back here. I tell her she must wait for the present. Is Mr. St. Aubyn at home?'

'At this very moment approaching. Do you see him? How do you do, Uncle Charles?'

The Rector, grown more portly during the last two years, came up smiling. Mrs. Brown-Clifford met him with unwonted animation.

'I shall have a great deal to say to you,' she said, nodding her head. 'But I will say it quietly when I get the opportunity. Meanwhile tell me, did my cat's kitten live that I sent you? It should have been a beauty.'

'Alas! if only we fulfilled our obliga-

tions,' said Mr. St. Aubyn, smiling. 'It arrived a perfect beauty of very tender age; its legs have never ceased to grow since, especially the hind ones; its long hair all came off in patches; it has one eye very considerably larger than the other, and having been accidentally shut in a door before its remonstrating powers were sufficiently developed to give the alarm, it has lost its tail.'

'So I suppose you have caused it to depart this life?'

'Not at all; on the contrary, it is a general favourite. Gwendoline declares that its very want of all charms is original and piquant.'

'It often happens that children do not in the least come up to the charms of their parents. My cat is unique,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford.

'Well, Mrs. Clifford, are you tired of Richmond, and thinking of coming back here again? Your poor house looks quite deserted and forlorn.'

'It depends upon circumstances.'

'It would be a pleasure to you to be near your daughter,' said Lady Bellingham politely.

'That also depends upon circumstances. Young people are funny to deal with: it takes some of them longer to shake into each other's ways than others; and the nearer the relations, the further they should keep away during the process.'

'But Eustace and Kitty are quite an old married couple by this time. I do not think we need expend any more anxieties upon them. They are as settled as they ever will be.'

'You think so,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford dryly.

'So will you when you have been here a little longer. I have been much with them.'

'So I understand.'

'And I have come to the conclusion that the honeymoon stage is over, and the more friends they now see the better.'

'Indeed!'

'I think there is no need to discuss their feelings, or what is best for them,' said Georgie bluntly. 'We must all fight it out for ourselves, and the only thing is to do it in the way that is least obvious to the outside world.'

'Ah!' said Mr. St. Aubyn, touching Georgie's shoulder kindly, 'here is an instance of a young lady who has succeeded admirably in that respect.'

At that moment a voice calling 'Georgie, Georgie!' resounded across the garden, and she jumped to her feet.

'Joe wants me,' she said. 'Uncle Charles, I will have my revenge on you some day;' and she sped away across the grass.

'A pleasant ending to a most uncomfortable beginning,' said Mr. St. Aubyn.

'My dear Charles,' said Lady Bellingham haughtily, 'you forget that we are not alone.'

'I beg your pardon, but Mrs. Brown-Clifford and I are such old friends, and have played at fox and goose together.'

'Then,' said Lady Bellingham graciously, 'I will leave you to have your talk out, and go and see what Alice is doing.'

She smiled and nodded, and swept

away, her long silk gown rustling over the gravel-walks.

Mrs. Brown-Clifford's face altogether changed when she was gone; it fell into deep lines; she looked twenty years older. She turned to her friend and laid her heavy hand on his arm. 'Tell me what it all means,' she said.

'You must judge for yourself,' he answered uneasily. 'I cannot disguise my disappointment.'

'Then you see how unhappily it has turned out?'

'For which?'

'For both. I will be just. Kitty is as little able to make him happy as he is her.'

'Why did you make him leave the Guards?'

'I thought I was wise. I thought if

they were thrown altogether on their own society—besides, he had done it already.'

'Not quite beyond recall. That was a fatal mistake.'

'Why did you not say so at the time?'

'Can't you understand? We were all in a position of extreme delicacy.'

'I hate delicacy. I suppose people call Truth indelicate because she wears no clothes.'

'You should not blame me for your own mistakes.'

'I don't blame you. I only blame myself for having believed you when you first induced me to think about it.'

'Come,' said the Rector, trying to speak cheerfully, 'there is not so much to fret about. I don't think you would have liked to have had Kitty an old maid on your hands—and the result of your

incessant precautions was such that it was more than probable ; and she was growing more and more timid and self-conscious, poor child !'

'I admit it. But at the same time it is an open question whether it is best to be what you call so broadly an old maid, or an unhappy wife.'

'I think you are going too far. I should not call Kitty an unhappy wife. I am not sure,' he added a little indignantly, 'that I do not think that she ought to be satisfied. Look what some women have to put up with from their husbands !'

'I think a woman would rather have a husband who loved her passionately, and occasionally beat her violently, than cool, courteous indifference.'

'*Chacun à son goût.* Women are very

illogical—always extremes one way or the other. But there are worse misfortunes than beating. Eustace is a thoroughly good fellow.'

Mrs. Brown-Clifford gave her most expressive snort.

Mr. St. Aubyn grew angry. 'What does Kitty complain of?' he exclaimed.

'Complain? If he took every tooth out of her head every morning, and slowly drew off her finger-nails every afternoon, she would not utter a word of complaint. It is that that puts her to such a disadvantage—she loves him.'

'Then what is the matter? What is amiss? He is safely married to her; he cannot escape if he would. She ought to be satisfied.'

'She will be content some day,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford solemnly. 'There will come

a day on which she will be content. You wilfully refuse to understand what I have been a fool to mention to you; but the day on which she will be happy again will be the day on which she can set him free.'

The words gave him a most unpleasant start. 'I do not understand!' he exclaimed.

'Perhaps you had better not try,' said the lady. 'It needs a perfectly unselfish spirit to understand that there can be no worse trial in this life to an affectionate nature than to feel itself a burden and misfortune to the loved individual.'

'These feelings become morbid and unreal,' said the Rector hastily. 'I am quite sure, Mrs. Clifford, that your duty as a mother is to combat them in every respect. It is all the old story—the want

of self-confidence which your system of education instilled into your daughter.'

'I hope I have frightened you well,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford, leaning back in her chair. 'Now there is the Bellingham woman coming back, so I will leave you to digest our conversation, and talk to her.'

Such a mode of speaking of his sister must have been startling to the Rector, but he took no notice. It was of no use being displeased with Mrs. Brown-Clifford —it is never much satisfaction to be displeased with anyone to whom your displeasure is a matter of the most profound indifference.

CHAPTER XVII.

'I AM going to cook,' said Gerty, coming up to the tent. 'I cannot go on like this. Here have we been ever so many days, and every day the same monotonous tea, either indoors or here, which is much the same. I am going into the woods, kettle in hand, match-box in pocket—alone, if nobody will accompany me—and there I shall cook, and eat what I have cooked.'

'What apparatus do you require?' said Georgie.

'Anything that Kitty will give me. Eggs, ginger—I can do a great deal with eggs, and ginger—tea, sugar—I am unfashionable, and like plenty—milk, and salt. Who will come ?'

'I will come,' said Georgie.

'You are unduly energetic,' said Alice languidly.

'All the same, I am not going to let you off, my dear. Kitty, what can you make ?'

'Kitty can cook very well,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford.

'Really ! what fun ! Come, Kitty, you see we don't know all your accomplishments yet. Now come, Alice, Georgie, Joe—all of you ! Here is Muriel with a load of aprons. Do rouse yourselves ! And if Mrs. Brown-Clifford and mamma will join us in the wood by the big ilex-

tree and the trout stream at five o'clock, we will have a repast prepared for them "under the greenwood tree."'

And Gerty put on a huge cook's apron. Alice rose and followed them unwillingly; but her grudging humour could not hold out against the fun that Gerty managed to infuse into the whole thing. When they reached the ilexes, the fire was already lighted. Saucepans, eggs, currants, raisins abounded.

Kitty set to work at once. She turned up her sleeves, donned an apron like Gerty's, who pretended to be excessively busy and did everything wrong, while she amused herself with singing the whole time:

'Simmer, simmer; boil, boil;
Put the butter in.
Raisins, flour, cream, and oil;
Biscuits, half a tin.'

'Not oil, mamma,' said Muriel gravely.

'Simmer, simmer; boil, boil;
Shake the pot about:
If no cream, then why not oil?
I can't make it out.'

'Kitty, that horrible concoction of yours looks like a witch's soup—boiled frogs and snakes into a rich pulp.'

'Whip it, Gerty—whip it! quick!' cried Kitty. 'Quick, dear! it will be spoilt! Oh, please do go on whipping!'

'Here, Eustace!' cried Gerty, as her brother appeared on the scene. 'Your tyrannical wife insists on my whipping this witch's potion without a moment's pause. Please take a turn.'

'It will be spoilt if you leave off one moment,' said Kitty.

And Eustace found a fork and a large bowl thrust into his hands.

'Oh, Uncle Eu!' cried Muriel, dancing

with delight; 'if you don't whip hard, the frogs and snakes will all come to life again. Oh, go on! go on!'

Suddenly a whish and rush of steam was heard—a great boiling over.

'Tell me if it is dynamite!' exclaimed Eustace. 'I can't stop! How long is this to go on, Kitty?'

'Don't stop,' she answered over her shoulder, as she flew to help Alice to rescue the overflowing of the kettle.

Meanwhile Georgie had been very busy and perfectly silent in one corner. She was now observed to come rapidly forward and stand over the fire, then to give a vehement toss in the air, immediately followed by a hiss and a rapid rueful glance after a blackened cinder.

'I call that wicked waste,' said Muriel gravely. 'Why Aunt Georgie should

spend ten minutes with eggs and flour and all sorts of good things in a corner, and then throw the result into the fire, passes my wildest imagination.'

'It was a pancake,' gasped Georgie, coughing in the dense smoke. 'Never say die! I will try again.'

'Kitty, my hand is dropping off!'

Kitty went to the rescue, and Eustace flung himself on the ground; but Gerty would not let him off, crying imperatively:

'Come and toast. The guests will be here in no time, and we shall have nothing but cinders and failures to set before them.

'Cinders and failures, see how they look!
I fear me your faith will be terribly shook.
Cinders and failures, this will bring to book
The boasting and pride of your amateur cook.'

'Execrable, Gerty!' cried her brother. 'Even I could beat that, to sacrifice

grammar to rhyme! Am I to toast that bread? Can't you give me a piece which is not full of large holes? See, the toasting fork slowly works through the holes; and nobody likes toast with crusts on.'

'When I was a little maid,'

sang Gerty,

'I was made to eat my crust;
And when "I can't" I said,
They only vowed, "You must."'

A clash of plates was heard, and Kitty triumphantly dished a beautiful cake, hot and steaming—nobody having the least idea how it was done.

'Vittoria! Vittoria!'

cried Gerty.

'Away with mortification,
Away with bitterness;
Guard Kitty from elation,
And sing her grand success!'

Eustace took it up, flourishing a spoon:

'Stir with your emulation,
Stir with all your power;
Avoid a mortification,
With butter, plums, and flour.'

And the whole party, except Kitty, joined in the chorus:

'Avoid a mortification,
With butter, plums, and flour.'

On this scene arrived Lady Bellingham, the Rector, and Mrs. Brown-Clifford.

'All cracked!' cried Uncle Charles gaily.

Gerty advanced solemnly upon him:

'He who comes here
Our wrath must dread,
Unless at once
He earns his bread.'

'These pieces of bread must all be toasted, Uncle Charles. The wood-smoke is most harassing, but 'tis a small evil;

sit exactly in it, and then in the density you will not feel it so much. Kitty, come, help me with the table-cloth.'

'I like tea out of doors,' said Mrs. Brown-Clifford. 'The grass is damp, insects abound, the tea is cold smoky water, the bread and butter is abominable, the buns are old, and the jam is pricked—anything will do for out of doors; and if you are expected to eat the horrors concocted by the amateurs of the family, it will be a mercy if you survive to tell the story. I like rural teas out of doors.'

The gaiety flagged gradually. It was not yet midsummer, in spite of the fine weather, and it became chilly early.

As they all went homewards, Gerty took her uncle's arm, and walked with him rather silently. Presently she

stopped, put her hand on his coat-sleeve and said :

'Uncle Charlie, the Begum never thawed.'

'I saw it, child.'

'Mark my words, she means mischief!'

'Don't, Gerty ; you frighten me,' he said uneasily.

The good Rector also was getting anxious.

CHAPTER XVIII.

'EUSTACE,' said Kitty the next morning, coming into his business-room, 'I find that I must go up to London for the day this week.'

'What is it? It will be awfully bad travelling.'

'Shopping chiefly. There are a good many things I must see about.'

'What sort of things?'

'Clothes, gowns for myself and mamma; and I thought I would see that

victoria for your mother—in fact, there is enough to do to make it very desirable that I should go.'

'I can take you any day except Thursday.'

'No, no, Eustace! I don't want you to come; indeed, I don't think that we could both leave home with the house so full.'

'One does not stand on ceremony with one's own mother and sisters.'

She winced a little at the thought that she did stand very much on ceremony with them.

'I don't want you to come, dear,' she said again. 'It will be very hot and dusty, and shopping is only tolerable to women.'

'Well, if you can do without me——'

'Perfectly.'

She had a little over-acted her eagerness to spare him.

'You must have some one,' he said quickly.

'I shall have Joe, at all events for the journey both ways: he goes up for a meeting.'

'Very well, only make Grimes order a brougham. I won't have you going about in cabs.'

'Very well.'

He considered her comfort constantly. She felt, as she often did, a warm feeling of gratitude to him. She went to him, and put her hand very gently on his shoulder, as if she would fain have said some little caressing word; but there was no response, he went on writing. She waited a moment; then her hand fell softly to her side, and she moved away.

An impulse seized upon Eustace to stop her, but he thought better of it. He did not want her to become accustomed to stay in his room; he wanted to keep it to himself, a refuge in which he might be sure of solitude. If he gave her any encouragement she might encroach on this valued privacy; so he let the hand he had raised to stay her find its way instead to the inkstand, and renew the writing on which he was engaged.

Kitty's footfall was very noiseless; she had tiny feet, and she always wore dainty satin shoes. He heard her move away to the door, open it very slowly, and go out.

Alice, coming down to ask her brother a question, found her leaning for one moment against the wall, her hands pressed tightly to her throat.

'What is it, Kitty? Are you not

well?' she asked; but Kitty was alert again instantly.

'Matter! — nothing. What should there be?' she exclaimed, and she went past Alice and upstairs.

Alice felt sadly that that little figure in its delicate dress of pale blue stuff, with the soft golden hair on her white brow, and gray eyes that seemed to be growing larger and larger every day, had something about it very pathetic. But she steeled herself again; her sister-in-law had married with her eyes open; there had been no illusion, no misrepresentation whatever. She had all that she had any right to expect; if she were not happy it was entirely her own fault.

The following morning Joseph Mulroy and Kitty went to London together. A shower had fallen in the night, and had

laid the dust. Kitty emerged from her brougham into Marshall and Snelgrove's splendid premises, looking as dainty and fresh and beautifully dressed as anyone in London.

Choosing gowns for Mrs. Brown-Clifford was no sinecure. The silks must be of a certain thickness, but very soft; purple, but not violet; spotted, but with spots of a certain size; costly, but neither to exceed nor be less than a given price. Kitty felt glad that she was alone, so that she might have no spectator of the trouble she was obliged to give to procure the right thing. It left little time for her own purchases; and she was looking at them rather indifferently, when a familiar voice fell upon her ear, causing her to start violently. Just behind her came two tall figures; she had not seen

either for a long time, and her heart beat wildly as she recognised Marion Austen and her cousin.

Kitty sat with all the delicate lace she was examining gathered up in her hand, gazing at them. Was it Marion after all? or was it only a shadow of her former self? She was altered; there was a dark shadow under each eye, and the eyelids were sharply defined and sunk deeply under the brows. Her face had grown thin, the beautiful outline of cheek and chin only too distinct; the colour came and went; her mouth had a settled look of great sweetness, but a pathos which brought the tears with a rush to Kitty's eyes.

Kitty had long known that Marion had never married. If she had looked happy and radiant, no wish to speak to

her would have crossed her mind; but seeing her as she was now, with her extraordinary beauty so overshadowed by care, a swift impulse rose up in the breast of that other sorrowful woman: she would seek comfort from her, she would understand.

Kitty went forward rather blindly, with both hands outstretched. Marion was bending over the counter; her companion drew her attention.

'May,' he said, 'this lady wants to speak to you.'

Kitty glanced at Lord Austen; he looked older, very gray, and with a grave, self-contained expression. But she only bowed to him, and looked at Marion.

'Miss Austen!' she said entreatingly.

The large dark eyes turned on her with no look of recognition.

'I beg your pardon,' said Marion.

'You do not know me, but I have never forgotten you. I—I am Kitty Bellingham.'

Marion gave a little start, and then held out her hand. 'I ought to have known you,' she said sweetly. 'Will you forgive me? It is long since we met.'

Lord Austen also shook hands. He was not glad of this meeting; he fancied it might be painful to Marion. He said something to her in a low voice, to which she answered:

'Yes, you are quite right, it is getting late. Where are you staying, Lady Bellingham? in the country, or in London? Shall I see you again?'

'I have only come up for one day,' said Kitty, a fear that it would all end thus rushing into her mind. She saw

that Lord Austen wanted to take his cousin away. She did not know what to say to keep her a moment longer. 'I am going back to-day,' she faltered. 'I should like to see you again.'

She held Marion's hand in both hers. Her own were burning; their clasp was feverish. She looked up with yearning eyes, so large, so wistful, that a sudden intuition burst on Marion. That look was the look of an unloved woman. It flashed upon her with a pang so acute that the colour left her face. To a woman less entirely noble some thrill of triumph would have come, some even irrepressible exultation that, in spite of all, that love which had once been the most precious possession of her whole life would not die; but to Marion the thought was one only of sharp pain.

She bent down from her superior height towards the little slender figure before her.

'I hardly like to ask you,' she said, the slight foreign accent becoming more perceptible, as it always did when she was feeling most. 'Will you come home with me now? My father is ill; he will not be able to see you, but I could stay with you half an hour. I should like you to tell me about my cousins and Castleford.'

She held Kitty's hand fast, for it seemed as if she could not answer.

'Austen,' she said, 'I am going to carry off Lady Bellingham home with me. It is not fair to desert you, but——'

'Never mind me. I will only put you in the carriage, and we will do our shopping another day. Tell your father that I will look in in the evening.'

'And your shopping?' said Marion, turning to Kitty and recalling her to everyday life. 'Have you finished?'

'All that is necessary,' answered Kitty. 'The rest can wait.'

She gave her directions, and they went away.

'Are you not well, Lady Bellingham?' said May, when they were in the brougham. 'Your little face has grown so thin and white—and so very pretty,' she added, with a sunny smile.

'I am quite well; it is not that.'

'Well, we will not talk till we get home,' said Marion, alarmed at the excessive agitation of her companion.

She leant back in the carriage, and did not speak again till they stopped at Ralph Austen's door, and she led the way indoors.

'Is Mr. Austen awake?' she asked the servant, and was relieved by the answer that he had not moved since she went out.

'Tell Mrs. Jones to send down for me at once when he wakes,' she said. Then she took Kitty into the drawing-room, and drew her down on to a sofa beside her.

'Poor child! poor little thing!' she said gently.

The hard pain rose up in Kitty's throat. 'Why do you pity me?' she said. 'Why do you say that?'

'I do not know,' answered Marion gravely. 'There is that in your little face that calls for pity; but I cannot quite find it in my heart to pity the woman whom Eustace chose out from all the world to be his wife.'

'You think that such a very happy fate ?'

Marion paused, then she said quietly :

'Would you undo it, Kitty ?'

'There are things that can never be undone. If I could—oh ! if I could !'

Marion drew away with a gesture of repulsion ; but Kitty had thrown herself on her knees beside her, and with clasped hands looked up into her face.

'Marion ! Marion !' she cried. 'Oh, Marion ! I love him so ; and though, alas ! I am his wife, he has no love for me. Is there on God's earth a sadder fate than mine ?'

The floodgate of words was loosened ; for the first time the bitter sorrow of her married life was put into words, and they poured forth with all the force of their long pent-up existence.

'If I had known—if I had even guessed how it would be! but I loved him so entirely, and I was so certain that I could make him happy with my love—that I could make it sufficient for him. But my punishment is greater than I can bear. He is unhappy; I cannot please him. I only bore him with my love, and weary him with my efforts to please him. It is not for myself—you see it, May? Don't you see it? It is the crushing sense that I am the crowning misfortune of his life; and only one thought comes to give me any hope—any relief to this dreadful pain. It is . . . May! May! pray for me that God will let me die, and set my darling free!'

May only strained her closely to her breast.

'My darling!' she murmured. 'Poor

little thing! if only I could help you!'

'Can you not help me, May? I know you cannot; but I see you understand. You know what it must be—do you not, May?'

May nodded; she could not speak.

'You say, and they all say, that I look white and ill, and I have grown very thin; but I am quite well. When you say so, a kind of hope rises in me. Fancy, May! one morning I went to a doctor, and asked him to sound my lungs and heart. I had a terrible pain in my throat—I often have it—I thought it might mean mischief. But he only smiled and smiled, and assured me that it was only neuralgia; that no stronger, healthier life existed than mine. He shrugged his shoulders at my indifference to his good news.'

'Kitty, you must neither say nor think such things; they are wrong, they are rebellious to the will of God.'

'Eustace is hard and bitter now; he does not believe in the goodness of God.'

Marion shivered.

'Kitty!' she said earnestly. 'Oh, little Kitty! have courage—have strength to persevere! You frighten me—you terrify me when you say that of Eustace!'

'It is true. He has lost all the happiness of faith; he is cynical; he sees bad motives in the actions of other people; and I see him growing harsh and stern, while I can do nothing.'

'Do not say that you can do nothing!' exclaimed Marion. 'It is not right, it is wicked! You must fight for him ceaselessly. Are not you his wife? You must win him back to good.'

'Teach me what to do; I am so helpless, so astray. I cannot talk to him; he turns away to conceal a yawn. I am not clever, like his sisters and like you; and I am always thinking about what I say, for fear I should not please him. The strain gets very great sometimes; and the pain in my throat, that they call neuralgia, comes on always when I have an opportunity of speaking to him, and then I cannot speak.'

'Do not give it up. You only want time, Kitty—time.'

'No. I used to be nearer to him once. He thought I could make him happy. No, May; time is drifting us further and further apart, and I am losing my anchor —the hope I once possessed.'

'You must not fail!' said May. 'You must not!'

'If I were strong like you, able to have influence. But I have no power, not even the power the poorest, sickliest woman in the village boasts of—her husband's love.'

Marion clasped her hands. What could she say—what could she do, in presence of such an irremediable trial?

'Kitty,' she said softly, 'do you pray?'

'I pray one prayer morning, noon, and night: that God will set him free.'

'God in His goodness grant that that prayer may be unanswered! It is wild, and very wrong.'

'I am so miserable.'

'That is no excuse for sin.'

'You do not know.'

Kitty was sobbing wildly now, her self-control utterly broken down. For a time Marion could only watch her pitifully,

with a tender hand touching her soft dishevelled hair.

Then came a sudden reaction. Kitty sprang to her feet, pressing her hands together.

'May,' she cried, 'do you wonder why I have come to you like this? Why to you, of all women in the world, I have poured out my bitter humiliation? Do you not wonder why?'

May did not answer; her eyes were full of tender compassion. Kitty went on, speaking passionately:

'It is because it is all your fault. Why did you give him up? Why were you not true to the highest obligation of all your life—your engagement and your love for him?'

Marion hid her face in her hands. Kitty went on without mercy.

'You and you only have destroyed him! To you he attributes his shattered faith in love and truth and justice! But for your too great wisdom he might have continued what he was when I knew him first—the noblest, greatest—— And what is he now?—the unwilling victim of a marriage that is hateful to him; tied—tied—tied hand and foot to a woman he cannot love.'

'Kitty, dear Kitty!'

'What have you to say? I know all the arguments—how well, heaven knows! I do not doubt you were right; your self-sacrifice was very great; the sword passed through your heart to reach his. And I have been always rich, so I do not know the value of wealth weighed in the balance against happiness and love. I am no judge. I never studied these

things ; I only see their results. May, when he married me he told me that his love and faith had died together ; but it was not true. I am his wife—his wife, May—but he loves you, not me ; loves you with that one love that is entwined with every fibre of the heart—the love I know so well.'

'Kitty, darling !'

'Only listen to me. I do not know why I speak to you like this. I have told it to no mortal but yourself. I think it was a sort of forlorn hope. May, you are so strong, so beautiful ; and I so weak and helpless. As you are strong, be merciful. I do not know how you can do it ; but, May, if you can, oh, give me back my husband !'

'If I could—if I only could !'

Kitty's hands fell to her side ; the

passionate light died out of her eyes; a sort of exhaustion came over her. Marion gently drew her down into the chair at her side, and put a pillow behind her. She lay very still for a time; then she turned a little way round, and said very faintly:

'Will you forgive me, Miss Austen? I am afraid I have said too much.'

May forced back the tears that kept filling her eyes.

'What can I say? What can I do?' she said. 'Kitty, there are times when our power of action is destroyed, when we can do nothing but lie still; and this is one of them. It is in God's hands.'

Kitty rose to her feet; she was shaken and trembling.

'I must go now,' she said. 'If I do not start I shall keep Joe waiting for me

too long. I am so sorry I came,' she said childishly. 'It was so selfish to make you unhappy too.'

Marion did not seek to detain her—there was nothing more to say. She only put her arms round her and kissed her. Kitty received the caress very gently; she did not return it. She tremblingly smoothed her hair, fastened her veil, and prepared to start. Marion came with her to the hall-door. At the last moment, as the servant held open the carriage-door for her to get in, she turned back, held up her sweet face to May for one more kiss, and then was driven away.

Lord Austen came in at the door as Lady Bellingham went out.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARION AUSTEN lay sleepless all through the long, hot summer night; her brain was in a whirl. Kitty's sorrows, the pleading of her eyes, were always before her, and the longing wish to do something to help her. She had turned to her ever-ready help and counsellor, her cousin Austen, when he had come to her immediately after Lady Bellingham's departure, and poured out to him the whole sad story, and the sorrow that she was powerless to

help. He had listened with the usual deep, tender interest in everything that concerned her—that tenderness which made Marion turn to him and lean on him far more than she was aware of; and then he became very pale, and said hastily :

'There is one way, May — one way——' but he did not finish his sentence, only walked away abruptly to the window, and stood looking out. Something in the few words, or rather in the way they were uttered, made her change the subject.

What did he mean ? In vain Marion turned on her pillow, striving to summon sleep to her aid ; the oblivion would not come, and she heard the clocks strike hour after hour. At length weariness prevailed ; the gray of the morning was

beginning to show through the chinks of the shutters when she fell into uneasy slumber, haunted by dreams.

Marion dreamt that she was walking in a large garden, sunny and hot, and sweet with a thousand perfumes. She could see the flowers on either side. Tall rows of phloxes were in the borders; heliotrope and verbena filled the air with sweetness. On a hot brick wall ripe apricots nestled. Marion was conscious of a vague sense of misery and trouble. She was walking between Eustace and his wife; and it seemed to her that they were longing to meet each other, but that she was between them, and they could not. She had lost the power to move; she was an involuntary barrier between them. Then suddenly in front of her she saw a figure walking swiftly along, and the in-

stinctive feeling that always made her turn to him caused her to cry out suddenly: 'Austen, Austen, help me!' And she put out her arms to catch him, and he always receded from her grasp; till with a little cry she awoke suddenly to find that some one was standing by her bedside with a lighted candle. She started up, recognising instantly her father's sick-nurse, Mrs. Jones.

'I will come at once!' she exclaimed, rapidly putting on her dressing-gown. 'What is the matter?'

She was well accustomed to be summoned at night, but something in the nurse's face made her see that it was no ordinary alarm.

'Mr. Austen wants you at once, ma'am,' she said. 'There is something on his mind, and I don't like his symptoms. I

misdoubt me that the gout has flown to some dangerous quarter.'

'Have you sent for the doctor?'

'Yes, ma'am, and for his lordship. It was Mr. Austen's wish. I would not have done it before waking you, else,' she said apologetically. 'But the same messenger did for both, so I thought it best.'

'You were quite right,' said Marion.

She was ready now, and she led the way to her father's room. The house was full of gray light; the nurse's candle looked red and feeble now—she put it out. 'One sees better without it,' she muttered to herself, and the early light was increasing with the rapidity of approaching sunrise.

Mr. Austen was very ill. Marion saw at a glance that this was no ordinary attack; he was suffering from a great

oppression and distress. His eyes, when they fell upon her, had in them an appealing look that touched her to the heart. She went up to him, kneeling by his side, saying tenderly that the doctor would soon come, and bring help and possible relief.

As the day began to brighten, and more light and air were admitted, Mr. Austen was somewhat relieved; the oppression was less; the watchers began to be more hopeful. The doctor came and went, returning about ten o'clock. By that time he was sufficiently restored for Marion to feel almost happy, and she followed the doctor eagerly from her father's room to hear her hopes confirmed. But he could not do so; there were fatal symptoms apparent to his experience.

Marion was one of those people whom no one would deceive—there was so much

of strength and power of endurance in her noble face. He told her his opinion candidly. She went back to her cousin, who was sitting in her father's sitting-room, and told him. There was, it seemed to her, no time for emotion or consideration of her own feelings. A terrible sense of the pressure of time came upon her—the man, whose days or even hours were numbered, was not fit to die.

'He must be told at once, Austen,' she said with ashy lips.

He nodded.

'I will do it, dear. I will take the first opportunity.'

It was terrible to him; but, as usual, he was ready to do anything to spare her.

'You will lose no time?' she whispered.

'Sit here and wait,' was his answer, placing her in a chair; and then, with a

white set face, he went to the bedside of the dying man.

An hour passed. No hour in all her life had seemed so interminable to poor Marion. She felt sick and cold, and sat listening in shivering suspense to the voices in the next room; her father's voice, high-pitched and faint, going on and on unceasingly, Austen's deep tones speaking now and then, always interrupted with querulous impatience.

At last the door opened, and Lord Austen came in. Marion looked up at him with anxious eyes.

'I had nothing to tell,' he said, after a pause. 'Your father knew his own condition.'

Marion clasped her hands.

'How does he bear it? What does he say?' she cried.

'He will not think of himself. He will not turn his thoughts to what is coming until his mind is set at rest on one point.'

'And that is?'

'Go to him, dear,' said her cousin. 'Do not keep him waiting. There is no time to lose.'

The nurse was administering food to her patient. She was indignant with everyone, saying in a loud whisper that this excitement was unjustifiable.

Old Ralph Austen, who looked worse than before, pushed her aside, and the soup she held, when he saw his daughter, and he spoke eagerly in a hoarse voice.

'What do you say? Will you consent? Did he tell you?' he exclaimed, catching at her gown.

'What is it, papa?' she said gently.

'He might have told you. I want you to marry him at once—here, by my bedside—before I can find rest, before I can dare to think of death.'

Marion shrank back with a little cry. It was terrible to her. Her father's wish had become a perfect frenzy. He implored, he commanded, he prayed, with tears pouring down his face, uttering strangely broken words about atonement, not daring to face his wife in another world unless this wish were gratified.

Marion was terrified beyond measure; she did not know what to do or to say; she hardly realized what was expected of her, in her wish to allay her father's distress. In her fear and pain she uttered an appeal:

'Oh, Austen, come and help me!'

He heard her in the dressing-room, and instantly was at her side.

Ralph Austen's excitement grew worse, and his cousin sent off for the doctor to come back. Then he drew Marion away, and whispered:

'What shall we do, May?'

'Oh, anything—anything to calm him!'

He went back to the bedside.

'Ralph,' he said, taking his hand tenderly, 'it shall be as you wish—now, and at once.'

A look of inexpressible relief came over the face of the dying man. He was silent for one moment, then the excitement burst out again. They must send for a priest at once; the marriage must take place in his sight. They could not calm him.

At last Marion came forward and knelt

down by his side, taking both the agitated hands in hers.

'Darling father,' she said, 'there shall be no delay. Austen will fetch Mr. Newcome at once; you shall see us married. See, he is gone, papa,' she added, as her cousin left the room. 'He will be back in a very few minutes.'

Then softly, tenderly soothing him, she strove with all her power to lead his thoughts heavenward, all the time glancing at the clock in a strange terror at the shortness of the time left to her father, and her inability to reach his inner soul.

The words passed over him; his mind could dwell on nothing but the one paramount thought. And at last Marion's words ceased, and instead, she hid her face in her hands and prayed passionately for mercy on his soul.

She was so absorbed that she started violently when a gentle hand was laid upon her shoulder, and her cousin's whisper was in her ear :

'May, there is no time to lose.'

Mr. Newcome had approached the dying man, and would fain have said some words to him ; but the fierce impatience again swept over his spirit.

'Go on !' he exclaimed. 'Go on, or you will leave me no time to die !'

The rest passed as if in a dream. This could be no binding legal marriage ; the ceremony must be gone through again. But the Marriage Service in its shortest form was read, the white, trembling bride repeating every word mechanically ; then when it was over, kneeling down in a kind of trance, only conscious that Mr. Newcome's voice and manner had changed,

that there was a strange silence in the room. Ralph Austen had fallen into a state of unconsciousness, and before night, time for him had merged into eternity.

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